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AND OTHER STORIES

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BY

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MYSTERIOUS MRS. WILKINSON.

I WONDER whether a man ever really forgets a single incident of his life—forgets it, I mean, beyond all possibility of recovery. I should be almost inclined to doubt it. I can't help fancying that all my personal experiences are stored up somewhere about me in a sort of ghostly Record Office, and that I might search the archives if only I knew the trick of discovering them. It so often happens that some chance association of ideas awakens the most unexpected echoes in our memories, restores to us our youth, our boyhood, our childhood, and not only enables us to recall something that took place in those far-away days, but actually lifts us for a moment or two out of our present into our past selves, so that we feel as we once felt and see as we once

saw—until the vision fades and leaves us with a queer, painful sense of loss.

I suppose everybody experiences this sensation occasionally. It came upon me very strongly one evening when I was sitting in the House, listening to Pole, who had embarked upon one of his deliberate attacks on the Home Secretary. Pole was humming and hawing a good deal; frequently he paused for some seconds, trying to find the word that he wanted, and more than once, failing to find it, he went on quite cheerfully without it. He was not in the least embarrassed by his lack of eloquence; he had a general idea of what he meant to express, and that was enough for him; every now and again he looked at the Speaker with a kindly reassuring smile, as who should say, "It's all right. Only give me time and I'll get through this thing somehow." I knew he would get through it somehow, and I also knew that there was a pitfall ahead of him into which he was morally bound to tumble. And, sure enough, he did tumble into it. He tumbled into it, so to speak, with a crash which provoked some derisive laughter from the opposite benches; whereupon the orator, who is always ready to do justice to a joke, even when he doesn't understand it,

began to laugh too, and then those about him were infected by his untimely merriment, and so by degrees the entire assemblage, without distinction of party, became convulsed.

It was at this moment that the House of Commons suddenly disappeared from my sight and was replaced by another chamber and quite different occupants. It is a long, low room, panelled with old black oak; its benches are not filled by legislators but by schoolboys, of whom I myself am one. Another boy is standing up, book in hand, construing Homer. Mr. Speaker is represented by a gentleman in cap and gown who is turning line after line of the Iliad out of literal into respectable English. This, at least, is what he thinks that he is doing; but in reality he has got a little too far ahead and is taking the literal reading for granted, in a certain impatient way that he has; so that the ostensible translator has only to catch the words as they fall and repeat them rapidly in order to be spared all personal trouble and responsibility.

"'Thus he spoke, and hurled his spear,'" murmurs the master.

"Hurled his spear," echoes the boy.

"'Nor did he miss him.'"

"Nordidemissim."

"Well," says the master, looking up with a dawning suspicion, "what is that?"

"What's what, sir?"

"What is 'nor did he miss him'?"

A pause; and then—"First aorist, sir," responds dear old Pole triumphantly, "from *nordidemizo!*"

He always used to be called "dear stupid old Pole" in those days: I believe there are people who call him so still. And yet I don't think he ever quite deserved the epithet of stupid. He didn't take the trouble to learn his lessons when he was a boy; he doesn't take the trouble to master the details of a subject now; but he is so perfectly good-humoured and so imperturbable that he always has his wits, such as they are, about him, and it is difficult to make him look foolish. In later years I have known him, under pressure of emergency, show an ingenuity equal to that which he displayed in the invention of that amazing verb *nordidemizo*, and with happier results.

I returned to actualities from my brief excursion into the past just in time to see the right honourable gentleman, the Secretary of State for the Home Department, rise to crush the honourable member

for Mid-Wessex. He could not order Pole to write out the lesson three times in Greek and English, but such punishment as he could inflict he did. His sarcasm was tremendous; his allusions to the extraordinary ignorance of the laws of the land which seemed to prevail amongst those who were liable to be called upon to administer the same were of a kind to make members of the unpaid magistracy blush for their order; and when in feeling accents he deprecated the wanton waste of public time entailed by such speeches as that to which the House had just listened, I am sure we all felt that the complaint was for once not an ill-founded one. And Pole sat with his hands in his pockets and smiled and did not care two straws. If Pole can go on not caring like this I shouldn't be surprised to hear of his obtaining an under-secretaryship one of these days. To be sure he will have to make haste about it; for, alas! it is something more than a quarter of a century since the verb *nordidemizo* was discovered.

Pole and I had been friends—more or less friends—all our lives. There had been long periods during which we had seen little or nothing of each other, and latterly we had met as a couple of middle-aged men do, who have each his own affairs to think

about and have half forgotten that they were once boys together. But on that particular night I felt very kindly towards my old school-fellow. He had unconsciously given me back a few moments out of the good days that I shall never see again. I thought I should like to have a chat with him, and I was glad when he joined me later and, passing his arm through mine, said we would walk homewards together, as it was such a fine night.

It appeared afterwards that he had something to say to me, but I didn't know that at the time, and I began by reminding him of the old yarn above narrated, whereat he roared with laughter; and so we fell to talking about Eton and about the masters who ruled there in our time, and about Spankie and Silly Billy (I can't help asking *où sont les neiges d'antan?* I know it is among the phrases which ought to be abandoned, but let me put it into a parenthesis just for this once only)—I say, we went on entertaining one another with reminiscences of persons and things profoundly interesting to us, but perhaps not equally so to the general public, until we reached Bury Street, St James's, where I live when I am in London, and Pole remembered that he had not followed me for mere purposes of gossip.

"I rather wanted to have a little talk with you, Walmisley," he said. "Might I come in for a few minutes?"

Naturally, I made him welcome, and when I had provided him with a cigar and with something to drink he confided to me that he was in trouble.

"What is it?" I asked. "It isn't money, I presume." Indeed I knew it could hardly be that; for Pole is a wealthy man, and has never been a specially extravagant one.

"No," he answered; "it isn't money."

"Then," said I, "of course it's——"

He replied without giving me time to finish my sentence, "Yes, it's the other thing. I met her at an hotel in Switzerland last summer, and when you have seen her, I think you'll admit that, as far as looks and manners go, she is the equal of any woman in London. If I had only myself to consider, I shouldn't hesitate for a moment; but there are the children to be thought of, and then my people have been bothering me about it; and if there's one thing that I hate more than another, it's having a row with my people."

Pole had been for some years a widower, and had two little girls, of whom his mother took the prin-

cipal charge. It had always been expected that he would marry again some day; but I suppose old Mrs. Pole had a not unnatural wish that his second wife should be, as his first had been, a lady of rank.

"Well, who is she?" I inquired.

He said that she was a Mrs. Wilkinson and that she was a widow; after which he came to a stand-still, as though there were no more to be told about her.

"Yes," said I, "and afterwards?"

"Ah, my dear fellow, that's just it; there's nothing afterwards. I know nothing more, and I can't find out anything more. And then, you know, my mother cuts up rough and begins to cry. Mrs. Wilkinson is in London; she has taken a house for the season—and a very pretty little house it is—and she seems to have lots of friends, only nobody can tell me her history."

"Pole," said I gravely, "you did well to come to me. You must not be allowed to make a fool of yourself. May I ask whether you are very much in love with this widow?"

He looked a little sheepish and answered, with a laugh, "Oh, well—aren't we rather too old to talk about that sort of thing? I thought her awfully

kind and pleasant, and I have always felt that as my girls grew up they would need somebody to look after them. That was how it began, and——"

"I feel sure that it ought not to go on," I interrupted. "If your daughters are to be provided with a stepmother, she mustn't be an unknown Wilkinson."

"Well, no—perhaps not. But she may not be utterly unknown after all. I thought I'd consult you about it, because in the first place, you're such a sober, sensible sort of chap, and also because Mrs. Wilkinson has a Miss Warde staying with her whom I expect you know. Her family live in your part of the world, and I dare say she could give you information. I didn't like to pump her myself."

As the Wardes are neighbours of mine in the country, it seemed probable that I should have no difficulty in finding out about Mrs. Wilkinson's antecedents from them; but my impression was that Pole was not particularly anxious that these should prove satisfactory. Before he left me I was able to form a tolerably shrewd guess at the state of affairs. My poor friend had evidently fallen a victim to the stratagems of the wily widow. He had gone farther than he had intended and now wished to

withdraw; only he did not see how an honourable withdrawal was to be accomplished. Now I flattered myself that I had some little knowledge of the world and of women (am I not forty-two years of age and a bachelor?), and I thought it would be odd if I couldn't disentangle this excellent and scrupulous man from the meshes. "Leave it to me," said I. "To-morrow you shall take me to call upon your mysterious Wilkinson, and whether she proves to be a suitable person or not, you may depend upon it that she shall not marry you against your will."

He demurred a little to this way of putting the case. "It wouldn't be exactly against my will, you know, Walmisley; only it *is* such a bore to have family rows, isn't it?"

I replied that it was the first duty of a good citizen to avoid such calamities; and with that we parted.

One ought always to be upon one's guard against forming preconceived notions of people. The result of finding them altogether unlike what one had expected them to be is that one's judgment is thrown off its balance and one's power of arriving at a really impartial estimate lost. For some reason—or

no reason—I had taken it into my head that Mrs. Wilkinson would be big and handsome, that she would have a good deal of manner, that she would still be in half-mourning for her late husband,that she would not improbably wear about her neck a large jet locket with the date of his demise incrusted upon it in diamonds, and finally, that she would be much pleased at adding the reader's humble servant to the list of her acquaintances. When, therefore, I was introduced on the following afternoon to an extremely pretty and rather demure-looking little woman, whose blue eyes had an expression of almost childlike innocence and whose quiet but perfectly-fitting frock matched these in colour, I was, I must confess, somewhat taken aback. Moreover, although she received me very civilly and did not look exactly surprised at seeing me, there was just something in her demeanour which suggested the query, "To what do I owe this pleasure?"—and such suggestions are disconcerting. Pole was not the sort of man who would see anything out of the way in taking one of his friends to call upon a lady with whom he was intimate, but the proceeding was, of course, a trifle irregular, and I should never have been guilty of such an irregularity had I not chosen

to assume that Mrs. Wilkinson was a person with whom there was no occasion to stand upon ceremony. As it was, I was glad to be able to explain my visit by saying that I knew Miss Warde's father and mother and hoped to have an opportunity of paying my respects to the young lady herself now that she was in London.

Miss Warde, however, had gone out; and so we sat and talked for a while to the widow, who, as I was obliged to acknowledge to myself, was not only unobjectionable but decidedly attractive.

"You are a great politician, are you not, Colonel Walmisley?" she asked. "I think I ought to tell you at once that I am a Liberal, so that you may know the worst of me. But Mr. Pole says my case is not such a very bad one as some people's, because I don't really know the difference between the two parties."

"I am rejoiced, Mrs. Wilkinson," quoth I, in my happiest manner, "to hear that your Liberalism is not very profound; because, if it were, I should tremble for our friend Pole's allegiance."

She looked full at me with a momentary seriousness, but began to smile again almost immediately. "I suppose," she remarked, "that a good many of us

accept our political convictions as we do our religious creeds. We are born Catholics or Protestants, Conservatives or Liberals, and it isn't worth while to change."

"Were you born a Liberal?" I inquired, for I thought she might take this occasion of enlightening us as to her origin.

"Those with whom I have lived have been Liberals for the most part," she replied. "But you are a soldier first and a Conservative afterwards, isn't that so? You would let the Radicals have their wicked will as regards a great many things, if only they would leave the army alone. I am sure you must be right. How can a civilian Minister know anything of military matters? I read your speech the other day about the difficulty of getting good non-commissioned officers, and, ignorant as I am, I could not help seeing that your facts are unassailable. And is it really the case that our poor army is going from bad to worse?"

I said it was—and so it is. That is perfectly true. If I am asked for my opinion, of course I must give it; but I would not have it supposed that I am so simple as to be taken in by every lady who has found out my hobby and chooses to simulate

an interest in it. Very nearly all of them do this, and I hope I know their ways well enough to be aware that they act in a precisely similar manner when they have to deal with my friend Admiral Bunting, or with Drinkwater, the great temperance advocate, or indeed with any individual who happens to be more or less of a specialist. Nevertheless, I am quite willing to admit that flattery soothes me, even when I know it to be flattery, and that to be listened to with respect and every appearance of pleasure by a pretty woman is a great deal more agreeable to me than being contradicted and pooh-poohed and snarled at, as I too often am by certain other hearers of mine. I certainly enjoyed my visit, and when Mrs. Wilkinson invited me to dine with her quietly on the following Thursday, I accepted without hesitation. Why shouldn't I dine with her? She lived in a remarkably well-appointed little house in South Kensington, and from the general look of her surroundings I judged that she would give me a good dinner. I thought her very nice, and said so candidly to Pole, as we walked away.

"But you know, my dear fellow," I added, "it is one thing to make friends with a pleasant, chatty

woman from no one knows where and quite another thing to marry her. If you will be advised by me, you won't drop her suddenly, but go on visiting her just as usual, and gradually let her see that you don't intend to propose. Then, if I know anything of women, *she* will drop *you*."

"That," said Pole, rubbing his head rather ruefully, "will be most satisfactory, no doubt."

Very evident it was to me that Pole stood in sore need of a staunch and determined friend to look after him. I suspected as much then, and I was quite certain of it a few days later, when the little dinner to which I had been so hospitably invited took place. Estimated by the number of guests who sat down to it, it was a very little dinner, for these consisted simply of Pole and myself. So long as we remained at table the conversation was general, and indeed could not very well have been anything else with only four people present; it was in the drawing-room afterwards that I discovered how serious matters were. I found that I had to talk to Miss Warde (who is twenty-two years younger than I am and may possibly think me an old bore), while the other couple withdrew to a remote corner and conversed

together in an undertone. Pole was sitting very close to his fair hostess; I saw him gazing at her with an immense admiration in those sleepy eyes of his. It was clear that he was no more able to escape than a mouse with whom a cat has begun to play. I can't say that Mrs. Wilkinson flirted vulgarly, nor perhaps was she flirting at all, in any offensive acceptation of the word; but I could not doubt that it was her purpose to change her present name for that of Pole, and I felt sure that, if she were not interfered with, she would do it too.

Well, I didn't blame her. A cat may look at a king, or may play with a mouse, or may marry a Pole, without infringing any law, human or divine. From her point of view, she was perfectly entitled to behave as she was doing; it was only from my point of view and from that of my friend's relatives that she was bound to give an account of herself first.

I was not long in arriving at the conclusion that no account of her was obtainable from Miss Warde. That young lady was so reticent, when casually questioned upon the subject, that I at first suspected her of having something to conceal; but I satis-

fied myself after a time that she only withheld particulars from me because she did not happen to be in possession of any. I elicited the fact that the Wardes had spent the previous summer in Switzerland, where it seemed tolerably safe to assume that they had picked up Mrs. Wilkinson; and that the latter should be anxious to establish a connection with people of such undoubted respectability was comprehensible enough,

"It was so very kind of her to ask me to stay with her," Miss Warde said gratefully. "I had made up my mind that I was to have no season this year; for papa's gout had been so bad lately that he had hated the idea of leaving home, and mamma would not consent to come up without him."

It struck me that both papa and mamma would have been more prudent if they had not consented to let the young lady come up without them; but that was just what might have been expected of the Wardes. They are a simple, innocent old pair, who follow the absurd rule of trusting every one who has not been proved unworthy of trust, and I was not at all surprised that they should have confided their daughter to the chaperonage of a total stranger.

However, that was their affair, not mine. My

business was to get upon Mrs. Wilkinson's track and follow it back to its starting-point. When I say that this was my business, I mean that I had resolved, in poor Pole's interest, to make it so. He honestly avowed to me, after we had left the house, that he distrusted himself. "It's all very well to tell me that I'm thinking of doing a confoundedly foolish thing," he said; "but between you and me, my dear old chap, I've been doing foolish things all my life long, and I suppose I shall keep up the same game to the end of the chapter, unless somebody is kind enough to knock me down and sit on my head until the temptation passes."

I assured him that he might rely upon me to do him this service, in a figurative sense, if necessary, and that I would at once set about making the inquiries which the case appeared to call for.

I did so; and my surprise at finding what a number of people knew Mrs. Wilkinson was equalled only by my disappointment at the very meagre information that they were able to give me respecting her. Most of them had made her acquaintance through Miss Warde, and those who had not had been introduced to her by those who had. It seems to me that people have come to attach very little im-

portance to credentials in these days. Here was a woman about whom absolutely nothing was known except that she was pretty and agreeable and apparently well off; but that was quite enough for the easy-going folks who partook of her hospitality and made her welcome to theirs. She might have been the daughter of a common hangman for anything that they cared.

Of course I heard rumours about her. One well-informed person declared that her husband had been an American pork-butcher in a large way of business; another professed to have discovered that she had an interest in the firm of Wilkinson and Simpson, linen-drapers in the City; while a third was sure that he had seen her upon the stage not many years back. But all this was obviously pure conjecture. The only certain thing was that she did not belong to any family that one had ever heard of; and this negative conclusion was all that I could carry back to Pole at the end of ten days of diligent research.

During this time I had seen Mrs. Wilkinson more than once, and I cannot deny that the favourable impression which she had made upon me at the outset was increased by each visit that I paid to her. I

was obliged to acquit her of being an adventuress: her quiet self-possession, her unconsciousness of being watched, everything about her made it impossible for any unprejudiced observer to think of her as that. If her position was not quite assured, and if she desired to make it more so by a good marriage, her ambition was surely a natural and pardonable one. But I need hardly point out that this made her all the more dangerous. Pole, I could see, was wavering miserably. Common sense, his duty to his children, and a horror of family jars were drawing him in one direction; Mrs. Wilkinson and his inclinations were pulling hard all in the other. One did not need to be a conjuror to foretell which side would get the best of it in that tug of war.

And now, I suppose, I may as well confess what, under these circumstances, commended itself to me as the best course for a true friend to pursue. What I am going to say may sound a little fatuous, but I am sure that those who know me will concede that vanity is not one of my defects. I must explain that I had called upon Mrs. Wilkinson several times, that I had found her alone and had sat some time with her, and that we had got on very well together—remarkably well. Now, although I am neither as

rich, nor as good-looking, nor, it may be, as amiable as Pole, I am still among those whom many ladies are pleased to consider eligible bachelors, and I could not help fancying that, as a *pis-aller*, Mrs. Wilkinson might be willing to substitute me for the suitor of whom I was resolved to deprive her. I thought that when she found out that Pole's attentions were not likely to have a serious result (and we know how soon women discover these things), her first wish would be to show him that she had another string to her bow, and I thought also that a natural feeling of resentment would prompt her to dismiss the old love immediately on taking up with the new. As for me, I had no fear of falling into the snare out of which I intended to drag my friend. I am not susceptible, like poor Pole; I bear a character for cautiousness, which I believe that I deserve; and I doubted not but that, at the end of the season, I should be able to retire quietly, without having compromised either Mrs. Wilkinson or myself.

So I set to work to delude this poor, confiding little woman, who only wished to secure a protector in a world where women are sadly in need of protection, and who was evidently far from imagining that middle-aged gentlemen were capable of practising

those arts of which her sex is apt to claim a monopoly. It really was too bad of me. I quite felt that at the time, and took myself to task rather severely about it. But in arguing the case out with my conscience, I put it in this way. My first duty was to my friend. Very well: was there any other method of saving him? I could see none. For his sake, then, I must inflict a slight disappointment upon a lady whom it grieved me to disappoint, but to whom, nevertheless, I was bound by no special tie. Observe, the disappointment would only be a slight one. I did not for one moment suppose that Mrs. Wilkinson would fall in love with me, nor was it any part of my design to ensnare her affections. No! I can lay my hand upon my waistcoat and say that no feminine heart has ever been broken by me. What I proposed to do was to rescue Pole by means of a little harmless stratagem—nothing more than that; and I must say that my first efforts were crowned with a success which I had hardly anticipated.

I won't assert that Mrs. Wilkinson exactly led me on, but she certainly seemed to be very much pleased with the various signs of friendship which I thought fit to display towards her, and responded to them almost eagerly. It was not all pretence on my part;

I really liked her and enjoyed listening to her artless prattle. I daresay she humbugged me a little, but I think I have already mentioned that I don't mind being humbugged by pretty people.

"Colonel Walmisley," she said to me one day, "will you do me a great kindness? Will you get me a place in the ladies' gallery of the House of Commons for the day after to-morrow?"

"With the greatest pleasure," I replied; "only I am afraid you will not be amused. There will be nothing worth listening to the day after to-morrow."

"Oh!" she said, "but I thought I saw that you had given notice of a question for that day."

I explained that questions and debates were two different things. I was not going to make a speech; and if I were——

"If you were," she interrupted, "I should certainly manage to be present, by hook or by crook. Why do you speak so very, very seldom? But I think, if you don't mind, I should like to be in the House the day after to-morrow, all the same." And as she said this she glanced up at me with a sort of timid look in her blue eyes, which I daresay I should have found perilous if I had been a younger man.

Since she made a point of it, I did as I was requested, and in due time she had the satisfaction of hearing me ask the Secretary of State for War whether it was the case that the 124th, 160th, and 176th regiments had only been raised to the required strength for proceeding on foreign service by means of reducing their respective linked battalions to a condition of practical non-existence, and whether it was proposed to take measures, and if so, what measures, to put an end to a state of things calculated to convey a false impression of the numerical efficiency of the standing army. The right honourable gentleman, who, I think, is sometimes needlessly curt in his replies, got up, grunted out, "No, sir," and sat down again. On being further pressed, he said that his answer referred to the first part of the question put by the honourable member for Weehampton; the remainder, being grounded upon a mistaken assumption, did not, he conceived, call for any remarks from him. Thereupon his colleagues cheered—though I really don't see what there was to cheer about—and the incident ended.

An ordinary, common-place person might have been disposed to think that I had been rather snubbed than otherwise, and might have refrained

from complimenting me upon the lucidity with which I had expressed myself; but not so Mrs. Wilkinson, whose forget-me-not blue eyes saw many things that were hidden from duller mortals. She had seen, for instance—so, at least, she afterwards assured me—that the War Minister had fidgeted about uneasily on the Treasury bench while I was speaking, and she was convinced that I had made him very uncomfortable and angry. "Why," she asked, "did you not go on at him until he told the truth? I feel certain that he was not telling the truth, and I think you let him off far too easily. If I had been in your place, I should have insisted upon his giving me some proof that those unfortunate regiments had not really been robbed of all their men."

I pointed out to her that such a course would not have been in accordance with parliamentary usage; but she rejoined that that only showed that parliamentary usage was one of the things which cried aloud for reform. "How can you be a Conservative," she exclaimed, "when there is so much that requires to be improved or done away with? A Conservative, I suppose, does not wish to see anything that is established altered, whether it is bad or good."

Possibly she made this preposterous assertion only in order to give me an opportunity of expounding the true meaning of Conservatism. She may have guessed that that task would not be distasteful to me, and may have intended all along to declare—as she did the moment that I had made an end of speaking—that she now understood the dangers of the Radical programme and would never call herself so much as a Whig again. It is not at all likely that her sudden conversion to patriotic principles was the result of my eloquence; but after all, a convert is a convert, and I imagine that there is joy among the missionaries over more than one ex-Pagan who has been brought into the fold by other incentives than those of pure conviction.

Pole, who chanced to be present when Mrs. Wilkinson made her new profession of faith, looked rather disgusted. "You never allowed *me* to convince you that you had taken up with the wrong side," he said reproachfully.

"You never tried," she retorted. "You only laughed at me, and said I didn't know what I was talking about."

"Well, but that wasn't so far off the truth, was it?"

"I am afraid it was very near the truth indeed; but there are some truths which it is polite and politic to ignore. Colonel Walmisley, you see, was kind enough to treat me as if I were a rational being."

"And he has his reward," muttered Pole, with as near an approach to ill-temper as his nature was capable of.

In truth my friend showed little gratitude for the trouble that I was taking on his behalf. The next time that we were alone together he assumed so dissatisfied and moody an air that I thought I had better come to some sort of an understanding with him. I did not deem it wise to reveal my plan to him in all its crudity, but I gave him a general idea of what I was about. "It is for your sake, my dear fellow," said I, "that I am trying to make myself agreeable to Mrs. Wilkinson. I want to create a diversion, in order to cover your retreat, and I believe I shall manage it, if you don't put spokes in my wheels."

He was so good as to say that he supposed I meant well. "But is it necessary to be so—so *infernally* agreeable?" he asked.

I replied that it was, and that I hoped he would eventually appreciate the sacrifice that I was making

in giving up my afternoon rubber of whist for the sake of drinking tea daily with a lady of whom I did not happen to be enamoured. I was not so unreasonable as to expect that he would thank me at the time. No one likes to be cut out, and I was not at all surprised to find that his attentions to Mrs. Wilkinson increased after this, and kept step with my own. There was no longer so much reason why he should not be attentive to her if he liked. My impression was that she had taken his measure, and that she considered me far more likely to make her an offer of marriage than he. She treated him very kindly in the main, only every now and then allowing herself a little smiling, feminine home-thrust, under which he winced; but it was for me that all her favours were reserved.

I never saw a man more bewildered than Pole was by this abrupt change of front. Even I, who have long ceased to be astonished at the keenness of women's vision, had hardly been prepared for so speedy a success, and my poor friend evidently could not make head or tail of it. Sometimes he seemed inclined to accept the situation and would absent himself for two or three days together; but he always came back at the end of that time, looking like a

schoolboy who has been playing truant, and bearing in his hand, as a peace-offering, a box of French bon-bons, of which Mrs. Wilkinson was excessively fond.

It was after one of these periodical returns to his allegiance that he invited us—that is to say, Mrs. Wilkinson, Miss Warde, and myself—to dine with him quietly at Richmond. He remarked ingenuously that he thought we all wanted something to raise our spirits a little.

"I am not conscious of being in low spirits," Mrs. Wilkinson said; "but I should like very much to dine at Richmond, though I haven't that excuse. Only I don't know—is it quite the proper thing to do? I have lived so much out of England that I am afraid I have forgotten what is permissible and what isn't. Colonel Walmisley, would it be right for me to take Miss Warde to an entertainment in the suburbs with two gentlemen?"

"Perfectly right in the present instance," I answered. "It all depends upon who the two gentlemen are."

She had taken lately to appealing to me in this way, and really I rather liked it. I suppose that no man would find it altogether objectionable to be ap-

pointed director of a charming woman's conscience, and I was glad—for Pole's sake—that she should thus openly show how much importance she attached to my good opinion. For Pole's sake, too, I betook myself cheerfully to Richmond on the day named. As a general thing, I don't see much fun in going such a long way for one's dinner; but when one has made up one's mind to do a good turn to a friend, one must not stop at small sacrifices. I say, I accompanied my friends to the Star and Garter with a smiling countenance, and as the dinner proved fairly good and the evening was a lovely one, I may add that I enjoyed myself.

To all appearance Mrs. Wilkinson also enjoyed herself. As for the remaining two members of the quartette, they doubtless had their respective reasons for looking somewhat sad. I should have mentioned before this that Miss Warde had an admirer—a young man of fortune, Seymour by name, whom I often met at Mrs. Wilkinson's, and who received a good deal of friendly encouragement from that lady. The willingness of Mr. and Mrs. Warde to let their daughter appear through a whole season under the wing of a chance acquaintance was perhaps not wholly unconnected with Mr. Seymour's presence in

London. By an oversight Pole had not asked him to join our little party; and this I suppose, accounted for Miss Warde's grave looks, which both I and our host noticed. The latter took me aside just before dinner and whispered his regret at this unfortunate omission.

"Awfully stupid of me!" he said. "What a duffer I am! But one can't think of everything," he added, sighing.

"There are some things which one had much better not think of at all," returned I, somewhat severely; for I could not approve of the habit into which Pole had fallen of drawing long breaths and throwing languishing glances at Mrs. Wilkinson.

"Don't!" he groaned. "I wish you wouldn't! What *is* the use of going on at a fellow like that, when he is trying all he can to run straight?"

I don't know whether he devoted himself so assiduously to Miss Warde after this because he felt that the least he could do was to endeavour to divert the poor girl whom he had unintentionally disappointed, or because he wished, as he said, to "run straight," or because Mrs. Wilkinson declined to have anything to say to him; but whatever may have been the motive of his conduct, the effect of it was that the

fair widow and I were left to entertain one another throughout the evening. After dinner we went out on to the terrace, and, seating ourselves there while the sun sank in the west, surveyed that pleasant landscape which is associated with the digestive process in the minds of so many hundreds of persons. For me it had other associations—a great many others. I am no longer young; I have dined at Richmond I should be sorry to say how often; and in that familiar twilight ghosts from the past began to float before me and drift away, like the smoke of the cigar which Mrs. Wilkinson had kindly permitted me to light. I was in a soft and sentimental mood; and so, I imagine, was she. We had remained silent for some time when she said, in that low, gentle voice of hers, which always sounded to me as if it could only belong to a well-bred woman—

"Colonel Walmisley, I wonder whether you would give me a little advice, if I asked you."

"I shall be delighted," answered I. "Advice is emphatically one of the things which it is more blessed to give than to receive. Never in my life have I sent any one who has begged me for it empty away."

I adopted this rather flippant tone because the

fact of being in a sentimental mood always puts me more than usual upon the alert against surprises.

I could see that she looked hurt. She turned her head away, saying: "After all, I don't know that I will trouble you. You would not be interested in what I was going to ask you about; it only referred to myself."

"Then," said I, more seriously, "you may be sure that it will interest me very much indeed." And this was no more than the truth. Could she, I wondered be going to consult me as to Pole's intentions?

But it soon appeared that no such delicate question as that was to be laid before me. What Mrs. Wilkinson wanted to know was whether I should recommend her to take up her residence in London permanently or not. She had thought a great deal about it, she said, and was quite unable to arrive at a decision. "It has so happened that I have lived almost entirely abroad until lately, and perhaps I should be happier in some ways if I were to go abroad again. Yet—there would be objections to that, would there not? Don't people often say unkind things about women who live out of their own country?"

She turned to me with one of her half-timid, half-

confiding glances, and I replied: "People say unkind things everywhere and about everyone, Mrs. Wilkinson; but it doesn't matter much so long as they are not repeated to the person of whom they are said. I know one humble individual who won't be able to help saying unkind things of you if you go away and leave us. You ought not to have consulted me about this matter. How can you expect me to give you a disinterested opinion?"

"I did not expect you to answer me in that way," she said, with more of sadness than reproach in her tone. "I thought—perhaps I had no business to think so—but I thought you were inclined to be my friend, and that if I asked you what it would be best for me to do, you would tell me. You have always been friendly until now."

Certainly, as she spoke these last words, she had *les larmes dans la voix.* I know that this effective sound can be produced by a trick which is easily learnt, and I also know that when a woman desires to make a fool of you, she almost invariably begins with a display of helplessness; but really suspicion must have limits, and I do possess a heart—a somewhat tough and battered one, it may be—still quite serviceable and ready to beat with generous emotion

upon cause shown. I did not believe that poor little Mrs. Wilkinson was trying to impose upon me; but in any case it would have been impossible to reply to her otherwise than as I did reply. I begged her pardon; I assured her that I was indeed her friend, and I added a few pretty phrases, such as I take it that any one, circumstanced as I was, would have uttered. She was easily conciliated, poor little soul. She told me all her doubts and fears, and very natural they were. People in London had been kind to her; but then she had heard that people in London often were kind to strangers for a time, and afterwards dropped them. She did not think she would be able to bear being dropped. She confessed that she was fond of society, and perhaps she was more dependent upon it than others because she was so lonely. Other people had their relations to fall back upon.

"And have you none?" I ventured to inquire.

She shook her head mournfully. "They are all dead. I should think no one is more utterly alone in the world than I am."

"But at least you have friends," I urged. "Miss Warde, for instance—I suppose you have known her for a long time, have you not?"

Perhaps this question was not in the best possible taste, but I never allowed such opportunities to slip; and not the least puzzling thing about Mrs. Wilkinson was the perfectly easy and unconscious manner in which she avoided giving a direct reply.

"Charlotte Warde is a great friend of mine, of course," she answered; "but Charlotte will marry some day—indeed, I should not wonder if she were to marry very soon; and marriage annuls previous friendships, you know. I don't mean that she will drop me, but I shall certainly see less of her."

"And are there no others besides Miss Warde?"

"None, I think. I don't make friends easily, though I get on quickly enough with acquaintances." She paused for a moment, and then added, with a rather tremulous little laugh, "Do you know, I think you are the only other friend that I have—and I am not at all sure that you care to accept my friendship."

"Dear Mrs. Wilkinson," I exclaimed, "how can you doubt me so? Pray, never doubt me again! There is nothing in the world that I prize more than your friendship and no privilege that I should consider greater than that of being allowed to serve you."

I protest that I said this with the most perfect

sincerity. I was carried away by my feelings. I had entirely forgotten for the moment that I was engaged in an intrigue which had for its aim the defeat of another intrigue. So completely, indeed, had I forgotten what I was about, that I ended by taking her hand, which was resting upon the arm of her chair, and raising it to my lips.

She started and got up at once. "Thank you, Colonel Walmisley," she said, rather hurriedly; "I —I am sure you mean what you say. Ought we not to be going home now?"

Our drive back to London was not enlivened by much dialogue. Probably we all had our own thoughts, and in the case of some of us these may have been more engrossing than exhilarating. Pole looked as solemn as a judge and hardly opened his lips the whole time. When we had seen the ladies home, and were walking away arm in arm, he began to remonstrate with me.

"I say, old chap, aren't you rather overdoing this?"

"Not in the least," I replied decisively; "you can't overdo a thing of this kind. I have an object before me, and I pursue that object. You ought to be admiring my thoroughness, instead of perpetually grumbling." And then, as I did not wish to prolong

the discussion, I hailed a passing hansom and said "Good-night."

The fact of the matter was that Pole's warning was only too justifiable. I was conscious that I was indeed overdoing it—nay, that I had already overdone it, and had committed myself to a line of conduct of which the possible consequences were too painful to contemplate. I suppose a good many readers will smile when they hear what it was that caused me to spend an almost sleepless night. Well, I can't help it; they must smile. All I can say is that if they had been in my place, the same conviction would have been forced upon them that was forced upon me.

I have stated before that, in forming my little stratagem, I had no thought of inspiring a lady with sentiments which I was unable to reciprocate, nor any suspicion that so lamentable a result would occur. Yet, of course it *might* occur; and remembering Mrs. Wilkinson's agitation on the terrace at Richmond, I feared—I greatly feared—that it actually had occurred. This was what I thought about during the silent watches of the night, and I must say that it made me dreadfully unhappy.

I went to call upon her the next day, and my

worst apprehensions were at once confirmed. The slight pressure of the hand with which she welcomed me; her questioning glance; her somewhat forced gaiety; the vibration of her voice—all, all combined to tell the same sad tale, and to show me beyond the possibility of a doubt that, in trying to extricate my friend from an awkward predicament I had got into a far more awkward one myself. Far more awkward, because I was now convinced that Mrs. Wilkinson had never been in love with Pole. She would have consented to marry him, perhaps, on account of her loneliness; but at the worst it was only her pride that would have suffered by his desertion of her. Pole must surely have been able to see that much for himself; yet he had felt very strongly, and still continued to feel, that, after having paid Mrs. Wilkinson marked attention, he was bound in honour to propose to her. And if he was bound to take that course, what, in the name of gracious goodness, was I bound to do? "I do not," said a certain pompous Radical politician, speaking in the House about this time upon I forget what question connected with army matters—"I do not envy the feelings with which the honourable member for Weehampton must recall at night the reiter-

ated misrepresentations of which he has been guilty during the day."

I was unable to join in the laughter that greeted this burst of censure. "I dare say you don't," thought I, "and you would envy them still less if you only knew what they were!"

I prefer not to dwell upon the truly wretched period of three weeks during which I was tossed upon the ocean of fate and driven hither and thither by baffling winds. Like the unfortunate persons described by Byron, "The magnet of my course was gone, or only pointed in vain The shore to which my shiver'd sail should never stretch again." (I allude to the quiet shore of celibacy.) Ah, yes! I knew, though I tried not to know, whither I was drifting. I couldn't see my way out of it; I couldn't help becoming more and more lover-like in my manner towards Mrs. Wilkinson; I couldn't help stammering and looking guilty when Pole roundly accused me of being his rival. To carry on the novel imagery with which I began this paragraph, I may say that I had given up all attempt at scientific navigation, and that probably no man was ever more hopelessly out of his reckoning since St Paul's celebrated Mediterranean cruise.

"Pole," I said one day to my friend, with dismal jocularity, "can you take an observation?"

"No," he replied, "I can't. But I can *make* an observation—and I will!"

"Pray don't," I interrupted. "You needn't—it's quite unnecessary. I know what you want to say, and you are perfectly right. I have been madly, criminally rash, and I have come to howling grief. But at least it doesn't lie in your mouth to blame me."

"Doesn't it?" said he; "I'm not so sure of that." And he walked off, with his hands in his pockets and his head bent.

Well, after all, light dawned upon me at last, and I was able to shape a course. Somehow or other, in the midst of all my misery, I had not been quite so miserable as by rights I ought to have been, and this struck me as a singular phenomenon which might repay investigation. I sat me down, looked things in the face, and said to myself, Why not? What if Mrs. Wilkinson's husband had been a pork butcher, or her father a swindler? What if she had had no father at all, to speak of? She herself was charming—I found her more charming every day—and my case was not like Pole's. I am not a

county magnate; I have not a pedigree yards long; I am not blessed with a couple of daughters, nor do I possess a mother imbued with aristocratic prejudices. And then all of a sudden it flashed across me not only that I should not mind marrying Mrs. Wilkinson, but that it would distress me beyond measure if she married any one else.

I despair of conveying any notion of the effect that this delightful discovery produced upon me. I can only compare my sensations to those of a man who has dreamt that he was about to be hanged and who wakes to find a letter by his bedside informing him that he has succeeded to a fortune. No sooner had I realised what my wishes were than I tore off impetuously to give effect to them, and the first thing that Mrs. Wilkinson said on seeing me was:

"How beaming you look! One would think that you had heard the good news already!"

"What good news?" I inquired.

"The news of Charlotte Warde's engagement to Mr. Seymour. I am so very glad about it, and they are both so happy."

"Oh, that!" I answered rather unsympathetically; "I have known for ever so long that that

was coming off sooner or later. But I came here to say—to ask—to tell you—oh, Mrs. Wilkinson, I am sure you must understand what I mean! Can you—will you make me as happy as Miss Warde has made Mr. Seymour?"

She did not answer, and on looking up I saw that she was pressing her handkerchief tightly against her lips and that her features were convulsed by some powerful emotion. That was all very well, but it gave me rather a shock to discover presently that it was laughter, not tears, that she was trying to subdue. "Well," she said quietly, when she could control her voice, "I am glad that is over. I swore to myself that you should propose to me before the season was at an end, and I have kept my vow."

"Mrs. Wilkinson!" I exclaimed in dismay.

"Oh, yes," she said calmly; "and perhaps I may claim some credit for having accomplished what you would have considered a sheer impossibility not many weeks ago. I think you will understand now that, if I had wished to marry your friend Mr. Pole, I could have done so without much difficulty. Do you really imagine that I didn't see through you the very first day that you came here? Do you imagine that there were not plenty of people kind

enough to tell me of the inquiries that you set on foot about my parentage and history? My dear Colonel Walmisley, I am willing to believe that you stand without a rival in your knowledge of military statistics; but may I tell you that you don't know a very great deal about women? You had much better not try to outwit us in future. You see, if I had been what you were so flattering as to think me, you would have rued this day to the end of your life. Will you, please, tell Mr. Pole that he need not think himself called upon to follow your noble example? I quite understand that he would feel as if he had done the proper thing after proposing to me and being refused; but it will save trouble if he will consider that performance as having been gone through."

I hardly know how I got out of the house. I did make some feeble effort to convince Mrs. Wilkinson that I was at all events sincere in my professions of attachment now, whatever I might have been at an earlier stage of our acquaintance; but I felt that it was too much to expect of her that she should believe me, and as a matter of fact, she did not believe me.

"I assure you you are not in love with me," she

said. "My humble little triumph is that I have made you propose to me without being so."

I went straight off to Pole and told him exactly what had happened. "This has been a most unfortunate business for me," I said; "but there is some consolation in the thought that you couldn't have got out of it better if I had been completely successful."

"I don't know whether you call this getting out of it well," returned Pole gloomily, "but I don't. What must she think of me! I'll tell you what it is, old chap: I don't doubt that your intentions were good, but I wish to Heaven you hadn't interfered with me."

I suppose he must have forgotten that it was he who had asked me to interfere. I made no rejoinder, and he went on to say that he had resolved to set his family at defiance. He loved Mrs. Wilkinson, and he was going to tell her so, be the consequences what they might.

"Very well," I returned; "go and tell her, then, since you can't be contented to let well alone. She may refuse you; she says she will; but I wouldn't answer for her. I am sure you know that I speak without any personal feeling of bitterness; but she

is quite the most perfect adept at deception that I ever met in my life."

The next time that I saw Pole he informed me briefly that Mrs. Wilkinson had dismissed him. "I don't want to talk about it," he said; "I've had a regular facer, and I suppose I have only myself to thank for it. All the same, I believe she would have accepted me if it hadn't been for you."

Well, that was quite possible; but I could not get Pole to see that all had fallen out for the best, and the whole affair brought about a coolness between us which I am sorry to say has not yet passed away. Down in the country the other day I chanced to encounter Miss Warde, who is shortly about to become Mrs. Seymour, and of course I could do no less than inquire after our common friend Mrs. Wilkinson.

Miss Warde replied that she was quite well, and then looked at me with a peculiar smile.

"I see," said I, "that you are in possession of certain secrets, and I dare say you have a worse opinion of me than I deserve. I consider that I was more sinned against than sinning; but never mind. And now that it is all over, will you tell me one thing? What was the mystery about Mrs. Wilkinson?"

"There never was any mystery at all," she replied; "it was only you who chose to imagine that there must be one. If you had asked my parents, they would have told you that her husband was a naturalised Austrian subject and a distinguished officer, and that she herself belongs to a good old family. I believe she married General Wilkinson, who was much older than herself, to please her father. Naturally, she was not well known in London, having lived abroad for so many years; but there are people enough in different parts of England who could have proved to you that she was quite entitled by birth and position to marry Mr. Pole."

"And pray, why did you not tell me this before?" I asked, with some indignation.

"Because Mrs. Wilkinson would not let me. She was very angry with you, and I think she had some reason to be angry. Of course she was angry with Mr. Pole too; but I believe she understood all along that he was not responsible for your outrageous behaviour."

I didn't mind being accused of outrageous behaviour, for in truth I had not seemed to behave well; but I was really sorry on Pole's account that I had been misled, and I said so.

"Do not reproach yourself too bitterly," replied Miss Warde, laughing. "He and Mrs. Wilkinson have met again, and I believe there have been explanations, and I shouldn't wonder if she were to forgive him. Yes, I think she will forgive him; but if you ask me my candid opinion, I doubt whether she will ever forgive you."

A QUEER BUSINESS.

I CALL it a queer business because, on taking an impartial and dispassionate review of the events, which I am very well able to do, I still consider it so. Lady Pontefract and others who pride themselves upon their acuteness may say that the whole thing was as clear as daylight from start to finish; but I am not so sure of that. I don't know that it ended exactly as it had always been intended to end; I am by no means convinced that certain persons did not find themselves compelled by certain circumstances to change their plan of campaign in the very thick of the action, so to speak; and although I am perfectly willing to admit that I was to some extent taken in—what honest gentleman is not taken in when women are pleased to match their wits against his?—I must nevertheless venture to doubt whether my original reading of the situation was

altogether erroneous. However, I will unfold my simple tale, and then everybody can form his or her judgment upon it.

It began with Mrs. Somers's visit to me one fine afternoon last September. I had only just got back from quarter sessions, and was smoking a quiet cigar in my den, when a small pony-carriage, driven by a lady, flashed past my windows and pulled up at the front door. The bell rang, and presently—for I was sitting, as I often do in warm weather, with the door open—I heard the colloquy which ensued between the strange lady and my butler.

"Is Sir Richard North at home?" a very pleasant and musical voice inquired.

"*Miss* North is out riding, ma'am," replied that idiot Brooks in his most solemn manner and with a distinct accent of reproof.

"Oh, I am so sorry! But perhaps Sir Richard is in?"

"I will inquire, ma'am," says Brooks more solemnly than ever. And then I heard him creaking slowly along the passage.

"A lady who says she wishes to see you, Sir Richard," he announced, as he halted upon the threshold

"Then why on earth don't you show her into the drawing-room, Brooks? What do you mean by leaving ladies standing in the hall?" I asked a little sharply, for if there is one thing that irritates me more than another it is the impertinent habit that my servants have got into of treating me as though I could not be trusted within a mile of a petticoat. Goodness knows I have annoyances enough of that kind to submit to at the hands of one whom my amiable and perhaps rather weak temperament has converted from the respectful daughter that she ought to be into the tyrannical despot that she is. It is really intolerable that one should be shepherded by one's butler.

Brooks withdrew silently; but, on second thoughts, I called him back and said, as I threw my cigar out of the window, "Perhaps you had better ask the lady to come in here, not into the drawing-room."

I had reasons for giving this order, which I will explain later on. Of course it sounds rather unceremonious to invite a strange lady into a room impregnated with tobacco smoke; but all things considered, I really couldn't help it; and my visitor, who was announced as "Mrs Somers," cut short my

apologies in a most charming and friendly manner. In fact, she actually forced me to light another cigar, declaring that she would go away without stating her business unless I did so.

"For," said she, "I need hardly tell you that I have called upon a matter of business. It is most irregular, I know; I ought to have waited until Miss North became aware of my existence and left cards—that is, if I may venture to assume that she would have done so eventually; but——"

"My dear Mrs. Somers," I interrupted, "it is we who ought to apologise to you for having been so inexcusably remiss. My daughter and I were quite aware that you had taken Southbank Cottage, and we were congratulating ourselves upon the circumstance, and were quite looking forward to the pleasure of making your acquaintance; but somehow or other one's days are so filled up, even down here in the depths of the country."

She murmured something about "so very kind of you." "But," she continued, "delighted as I shall be to know Miss North, I have taken this liberty because I was so very anxious to see *you*, Sir Richard, and to ask a great favour of you. You have an only daughter, and perhaps that may enable you to

sympathise a little with the mother of an only son. And I think you must have known my poor husband. Was he not in the Guards with you?"

Well, I couldn't say that I remembered him. It is a considerable number of years since I retired from the Guards, and one doesn't necessarily know every officer in every regiment of that brigade. However I didn't want to chill her—for she was really a very pretty woman, and her manner was most agreeable—so I replied hastily, "Oh, dear me, yes; Somers, to be sure! Poor fellow! Yes, yes." Which I flatter myself, was polite, without being precisely untruthful.

Thus encouraged, she proceeded to state what she wanted of me. She had, it appeared, a son who had failed in his preliminary examination for the army, as why shouldn't he? Many excellent men do fail in those senseless and abominable examinations. However, he had been got into a West India regiment, and had served two years with it, and had now come home to be transferred, as she hoped, to the cavalry. But the difficulty was this. She was dreadfuliy afraid that the authorities meant gazetting him to the 99th Dragoon Guards, who were at that time stationed in India, whereas she

had set her heart, and he had set his heart, upon his joining the 26th Lancers. Now the 26th Lancers, as it happened, were then quartered at Torchester, which is within a drive of our neighbourhood; so that if her ambition and her son's could be gratified, it would, as she said, be "almost too delightful."

Why, in a matter requiring such delicate handling and such powerful interest as this, did she apply for assistance to me, of all men in the world—a simple country squire, with no influence, or at all events none worth mentioning, in high places? My tongue did not put this question, but possibly my eyes did; for she replied:

"Oh, Sir Richard, I'm quite sure you can manage it, if you will. Everybody knows how popular you are and—and respected" (I am afraid she did hesitate a second before bringing out this last epithet) "and a word or two from you at the War Office or the Horse Guards would go such a very long way!"

Now I know perfectly well that every man who reads this will smile and think that he himself would have been rather displeased than otherwise by such undisguised flattery; but I know quite

equally well that he wouldn't have been in the least displeased. It is not in human nature to dislike flattery; and besides, there was a germ of truth in what Mrs. Somers asserted. I don't say that there was more than a germ; but a germ there was, and I consider that I was quite justified in telling her that if the thing could be done I could do it.

So she thanked me warmly, and then I expressed the surprise, almost amounting to incredulity, that I felt at her having a grown-up son, and she responded by a very neat *tu quoque*, and I was thinking about offering her a cup of tea, when she jumped up and said she really mustn't keep her poor little pony standing any longer.

I did not press her to stay quite as urgently as I might have done if I had not been in momentary expectation of seeing Alma return from her ride. I mentioned just now that I am the humble slave of my daughter Alma. Of course I ought never to have allowed myself to become so; but there it is. She established her authority over me when she was still quite a child, and a young lady of nineteen who has had her head from childhood is, as most people will admit, no longer amenable to discipline or even control.

Not that Alma's yoke has ever weighed very heavily upon me, save at one point; but upon that one point she has from the first made it clear that she will stand no trifling, and she has been as obstinate and unreasonable about it as women invariably are when they take some absurd notion into their heads. No apprehension could possibly have been more absurd or groundless than that of my giving my daughter a stepmother. I am far too appreciative of the society of ladies generally to contemplate such a step; added to which, I have no fancy for living in a hornet's nest. Alma, however says that people very often do things that they have never contemplated, and declares that I am yielding and easily talked over—which may be true; she ought to know. But when she goes on to aver that I am still young, that I am handsome in person, that I am notoriously well off, and that consequently every unmarried woman in the county is prepared to set her cap at me, she is talking the purest nonsense. True, I am not much more than forty years of age; but any good looks that I may once have possessed have, as I need hardly say, faded long ago, like the last rose of summer; and as for my being well off—is it likely that any owner of land can be

well off in these hard times? I learnt many years back, though, that it is a waste of breath to talk common sense to the sex which we only designate as "fair" because it would be so rude to employ the opposite term. One can but bow to their arbitrary behests and endeavour to circumvent them; and that is not the easiest thing in the world to do, and I am a singularly unlucky man. Of course Alma came cantering up the avenue just as Mrs. Somers was driving down it, and of course I had to submit to a severe catechising immediately afterwards.

"Business!" says Alma, with a toss of her pretty little golden-haired head; "I really don't understand what business any lady—and a total stranger too—could have in your study." (How like that wretch Brooks to have told her that he had shown Mrs. Somers into my study!)

"My dear," I replied mildly, "it appears possible that there may be still just a few things in the world which you don't understand."

The fact is that when I vetoed the drawing-room I had quite forgotten that the pony-chaise was *en évidence* at the door; so simple-minded am I and incapable of deceiving the veriest infant.

Alma rejoined that she might be very foolish and

very inexperienced, but that she did think she had intelligence enough to understand what a young and—well, some people might call her a rather good-looking widow, meant by forcing her way into the house of a neighbour to whom she had not even been introduced.

I humbly pointed out that this assertion of my daughter's was a direct contradiction of her previous one; but she said that was mere quibbling; so it seemed best, upon the whole, to tell her the truth, though I had little hope that she would believe it.

By good luck, it chanced that she herself was in possession of a fact which to some extent vindicated my veracity. "Mrs. Somers really has a son," she remarked meditatively; "I met him last month when I was staying with the Whartons. I never thought until now of his being any relation of the Mrs. Somers at Southbank Cottage; but of course it must be the same, for I remember his telling me that he had been in a West India regiment and was in hopes of getting into the cavalry shortly."

"In that case," I observed, "you will perhaps now admit that Mrs. Somers might have come to see me upon business."

Alma shook her head and looked doubtful. "That

only shows," she replied, "that Mrs. Somers had an excuse for coming to see you; she can't have supposed that you had any power to transfer her son from one regiment into another."

It is an old story that no man is a prophet in his own country, nor any hero heroic to his valet. If I have some trifling political and social influence, my daughter would naturally be the last person to give me credit for anything of the sort; nor did I attempt to insist upon it. I simply said: "A widow and an orphan have appealed to me for help; that, I think, is enough. I shall certainly do what little I can to be of use to them, and you will oblige me, Alma, if you will call at Southbank Cottage some day soon."

And I am sorry to say that the reply of that impertinent girl was: "If the widow had had a snub nose and grey hair she would have appealed in vain. But she shall be duly called upon. She evidently doesn't mean to be ignored, and as she will probably come here again to discuss business before long, I had better be upon speaking terms with her I suppose."

I had to go up to London the next day to buy some cartridges, as well as to attend to other matters

of more or less importance. I mentioned this to Alma at breakfast, and she smiled in a demure and rather provoking way which is habitual to her, but abstained from any verbal comment. Being in town, I naturally looked up some official friends of mine to see whether anything could be done for young Somers, and I was agreeably surprised to find that no fuss was likely to be made about the request which I had to make. There was, it seemed, a vacancy in the 26th Lancers, to which corps, so far as I could make out, Mr. Somers would have been gazetted without my intervention; but I confess that I did not avow this in so many words to his mother, at whose house I stopped on my way home from the station, and who kindly refreshed me with a cup of tea. I did, however, do my best to convince her that she was far too profuse in her expressions of gratitude. How could I help it if she would insist upon calling me her benefactor and wishing with clasped hands and tears in her eyes (upon my honour and conscience there were tears in her eyes) that she could do anything, *anything* to show how thankful she was to me for my great kindness.

I am a very tender-hearted man, and it grieves me beyond measure to see a lady in tears. To relieve

the strain of the situation and give a lighter tone to our intercourse, I responded in my best manner: "Mrs. Somers, I shall take you at your word and ask a favour of you at once. What day will you come and lunch with us?"

In the course of my studies of feminine character, which have been patiently pursued during a number of years, I have often had occasion to notice that there is nothing which ladies dislike quite so much as being taken at their word. Mrs. Somers looked down at her tea-cup and smiled and hesitated, and when at last she opened her lips it was to decline my modest invitation. I forget whether I have mentioned that she had a pair of very pretty soft brown eyes. She raised them to mine now with a pleading expression which was extremely effective, and, "Don't think me too punctilious, Sir Richard," said she; "but, you see, Miss North hasn't called here yet, and—and don't you think it would perhaps be *wiser* for me to wait until she does?"

I may have looked a little embarrassed, for mine is a bashful temperament. At any rate, I could not think of an appropriate reply, and she immediately resumed; "I see you agree with me, and you won't misunderstand my refusal. But if you would be

good enough to extend your hospitality to my son, that would be a different thing. George is coming down to-night to stay for a time with me, and he ought to call upon you—indeed, he *must* call upon you—to thank you for what you have so generously done for him."

So it was agreed that George should lunch with us on the next day but one, and when I left Mrs. Somers's cottage I felt that I had laid the foundation of one of those platonic friendships which are the happiness and consolation of middle age, and which only the wilfully blind, the suspicious and the ill-natured persist in misinterpreting.

"What sort of a fellow is this young Somers?" I inquired casually of Alma shortly before the hour at which we had been given to understand that we might look for the honour of welcoming him; and I was not sorry to see her shrug her shoulders and hear her reply that he was just like the general run of subalterns. "A grown-up Sandhurst boy, who talks a great deal about cricket and shooting and riding, and very little about anything else," she said.

This slightly contemptuous summing up of him was, I say, rather a relief to me; for when one has an only child, and when that child is a daughter, one

naturally doesn't care to be too promiscuous in one's invitations to impecunious youths. Besides, I had other ideas for Alma's future happiness—ideas which I had not been such a fool as to arouse opposition by communicating to her, but which I had good hope would be brought to a satisfactory realisation in due course of time.

George Somers, when he arrived, proved to be very much what Alma had pithily described him as being. She might have added with truth that he was a gentleman, that his manners were straightforward and unaffected and that he had such comeliness of person as belongs to youth, health and strength. He did not thank me with quite as much fervour as his mother had displayed; but he said it was "awfully good" of me to have taken such a lot of trouble on his behalf, and as I had not really taken any trouble at all, that acknowledgment seemed to meet the requirements of the case. I was very much taken with the lad, and listened to his simple talk during luncheon with a great deal of pleasure. Also I was glad to notice that he hit it off pretty well with Alma, though he was evidently a little afraid of her—in which respect he did not stand alone. Alma is somewhat given to snubbing young men, not to speak of

old ones. She apparently thinks that we all want taking down a peg and that it is her mission in life to render us this service. As she is pretty (indeed, at the age of three-and-forty I suppose there is no harm in my saying that our family is somewhat notorious for beauty), the generality of men do not bear malice against her, but submit more in sorrow than in anger, to her occasional sharp speeches. However, she was quite kind and civil to young Somers, and told him that she hoped he would stay the afternoon if he had nothing better to do, as she expected some people to come and play lawn tennis.

Pending the arrival of the usual contingent in white and striped flannels, I gave him a cigar and led him off to the stables, where we had a little talk which confirmed the good opinion that I had already formed of him. He was very keen about soldiering, he told me, and had a modest hope that, if the fates were propitious, he might some day distinguish himself in his calling.

"Of course," said he, "it isn't a paying trade; but one can't have everything, and, as I tell my mother, I shouldn't have made a fortune at anything else."

"What," I inquired, "would your mother have liked you to do?"

At this he laughed and blushed a little, and answered, "Oh, I believe she admits that I'm not fit for any other profession; only she is strongly impressed with the idea that I ought to pick up coin somehow, and there's only one way in which I can do that, you know. The fact is, I don't at all agree with her. I should hate to marry for money, and I think a man who does that sort of thing is a despicable kind of creature, don't you? If ever I find myself in danger of falling in love with an heiress I shall take to my heels like a shot."

These were highly creditable sentiments; but I confess that I was a little amused by them, and I represented to my young friend that exaggeration is always to be deprecated. My own views as to matrimony are very much those of Tennyson's North-country farmer. I do not approve of fortune hunting; but if I had a son, I should certainly prefer to see him consorting with the wealthy than with the penniless, and I said to young Somers that one really need not be so thin-skinned as to run away from attractive heiresses out of fear of slanderous tongues. Such conduct, I added, might under certain easily imaginable circumstances be very hard upon the poor heiress.

He agreed quite gravely that that was true enough, and then we fell to examining the horses, which gave him an opportunity of displaying no little knowledge and discrimination.

After that day we saw a good deal of George Somers. During the month of September we had rather a large party of friends in the house for the shooting, and he came out with us and proved himself a very fair shot and achieved popularity among the men as well as among the ladies. Alma was graciously pleased to approve of him. She told me that there was a good deal more in Mr. Somers than she had at first supposed, and he was always sure of a welcome from her. But there was no getting her to extend an equal measure of friendliness to his mother, upon whom she called by my desire, but whom she chose to treat with a distant civility of which I was quite ashamed. I did what I could to make amends for my daughter's frigidity; but I knew that Mrs. Somers must have noticed it, and I was very much afraid that she might guess to what it was due—which placed me in a more or less ridiculous position.

My old friend Lady Pontefract, who is a near neighbour of ours, laughed at me when I complained

to her one day—not for the first time, perhaps—of the difficulty that I found in showing hospitality to any lady who was not either provided with a husband or well stricken in years. "You have only yourself to blame, Sir Richard," said she. "Everybody knows what a flirt you are, and I quite agree with Alma that you require close and careful watching. If you want to be free to carry on your flirtations, the best thing you can do is to get her married as soon as possible."

I hope I need not say that this was only a harmless little joke. I am not such a goose as to think of flirting with anybody at my time of life, and if I do enjoy being upon terms of intimacy with ladies there is nothing discreditable in that, I trust. But Lady Pontefract's allusion to Alma's possible marriage enabled me introduce a subject upon which I had long wished to speak to my friend and neighbour. Her son, young Lord Pontefract, was, as I knew, coming home shortly, after an absence of several years, during which he had visited the uttermost ends of the earth, as the custom of young men is in these days, and it was natural to suppose that his next step would be to take to himself a wife. Now I thought it would be no bad thing if his choice

should fall upon my daughter, and if she, on her side, should take a liking to him. Lord Pontefract is not a rich man; but he is the head of a fine old family, and his estates adjoin those which Alma must sooner or later inherit. Of his personal character I did not know much, because he had been so little at home since his boyhood; but I remembered that Alma and he had been rather friends when she was a small child and when he used to come over to see us during his holidays; so that a renewal of their friendship seemed probable enough.

I mentioned my hopes to Lady Pontefract, who said that they quite accorded with her own, adding, however, that, so far as Alma's inheritance of my property was concerned, there could be no sort of certainty about that.

"We shall always be at the mercy of any Mrs. Somers who may chance to turn up," she declared; "so you see, my dear Sir Richard, if I second you in your scheme, it won't be from any mercenary motive."

I was not altogether pleased with this speech. Certainly I can't afford to make Alma an immediate allowance of five thousand a year or anything of that kind; still I consider her a decidedly good

match for anybody, and I should have been very much surprised to hear that Pontefract had a prospect of doing better. But what was far more absurd and far more surprising than Lady Pontefract's hint that I might marry again was a warning which she thought fit to address to me when I rose to take my leave. After informing me that she intended giving a large ball to celebrate her son's return, and that she hoped all our party would be present at it, she went on to say:

"Now, Sir Richard, you mustn't be offended with me if I implore you not to worry dear Alma about our project. Girls are apt to turn obstinate when one tries to drive them, and though I am sure you mean to be the kindest father in the world, you *are* just a little bit of a domestic tyrant, you know."

Of all the ridiculous things that have ever been said to me in my life I do think that that was far and away the most ridiculous. I, of all people, a domestic tyrant! I, who hardly dare to call my soul my own! My breath was so completely taken away that I went off without a word of reply and chewed the cud of my amazement as I rode homewards.

But ludicrously false as Lady Pontefract's pre-

mises were, her deductions were doubtless accurate enough, so far as they condemned the system of domestic tyranny in the abstract; and although that form of it under which I groaned may not have rendered me obstinate (for indeed there is no obstinacy in me), it did, I freely own, exercise a deleterious influence upon my moral character, driving me to little acts of deception which I should otherwise have scorned. Take the case of Mrs. Somers, for example. I could not urge her to come up often and see us, because I knew that, if she did, my daughter would show her the cold shoulder. On the other hand, I did not feel disposed to abandon what was fast ripening into a warm friendship between this charming and sympathetic woman and myself. What was the consequence? Why, simply that I took to paying her quasi-clandestine visits, and that while her son was playing lawn tennis or billiards, or otherwise amusing himself at my house, I not unfrequently slipped down to Southbank Cottage for a cup of tea. Nothing could have been more innocent than these visits of mine; but I confess that it was a dangerous habit to fall into, and it had a compromising appearance, and if Alma had heard of it I should have got into sad trouble.

I was very glad when Alma of her own accord suggested that Mrs. Somers should be asked to dinner. Alma hates giving dinner-parties, and so, for the matter of that, do I; but one must not shirk one's duties, and we have to entertain the neighbourhood once a fortnight, on an average. I was, I say, very glad when Mrs. Somers was invited to join one of these somewhat dreary gatherings, and still more glad when she accepted our invitation; for I had not felt sure that she would do so. Moreover, the evening, when it came, was marked by an episode which afforded me unexpected relief and gratification. Amongst our guests was a certain Colonel Sinclair, who lives near us, and who is a very good fellow, though a little heavy, I always think. Now, although Mrs. Somers had never mentioned his name to me, it appeared that he was an intimate friend of hers, and he had not been ten minutes in the room before everybody possessed of eyes could see that he would be very glad to be something more than an intimate friend. Sinclair is a tall, thin man who is very solemn and serious about everything. I was greatly diverted by the undisguised solemnity and seriousness of his attentions to Mrs. Somers, who for her part was a little vexed by them, I fan-

cied. I was sorry that she should be bored in that way; yet I could not help rejoicing in a state of things so well adapted to quiet the suspicions and soothe the animosity of my ever-watchful daughter. That it had this desirable result I was made aware in the drawing-room after dinner, while Mrs. Somers was kindly singing to us, and while Sinclair, who knows about as much of music as he does of Chinese, was standing behind her and turning over the leaves for her at the wrong moment.

"Poor papa!" whispered Alma compassionately in my ear, "I'm afraid you are quite cut out."

"My dear," I replied, "I am delighted to hear you say so. May they be happy! Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to dance at their wedding."

At the same time, I did not think it very likely that an opportunity would be given me of thus disporting myself. Later in the evening I took occasion to speak to Sinclair of Mrs. Somers in terms of warm eulogy, but for some reason or other he did not take my remarks in very good part. Foolish though it may seem, I do believe that he was jealous of me, and, to be sure, he must be quite as old a man as I am.

And now I have to record something which I cannot reflect upon without becoming extremely hot and uncomfortable, so that I almost expect to see the paper turn pink under my pen as I write. Yet, what can I do? I must tell the truth if I am to tell this story at all; and the truth is that while I was helping Mrs. Somers to put on her wraps in the library, she behaved after a fashion which, for the first time in the course of our aquaintanceship inspired me with feelings of grave alarm.

Said she, in very soft and gentle accents, "Are you angry with me, Sir Richard?"

"My dear Mrs. Somers," I returned, "do I look angry? And why, in the name of wonder, should I be? You have honoured and charmed us with your company this evening, you have sung divinely for us——"

"Yes, yes," she interrupted; "but I am afraid you are not pleased with me, all the same, and it makes me very unhappy to think that I may have displeased you. Do you not understand that one can't always do what one wishes or talk to the people whom one would prefer to be talking to?"

I wonder what response most elderly gentlemen would have made to an appeal of that kind. What

I said was: "Dear Mrs. Somers, I understand *perfectly*. We all have to take our turn of the social treadmill upon occasion, and to display amiability and—and prudence. Besides, you and I have other opportunities of exchanging ideas, have we not?"

So she thanked me and pressed my hand and went away; and I candidly avow that I was not sorry to have escaped safely from that little interview.

It is a great pity that so few people are capable of platonic friendship, or, to use what I believe is the more correct phrase, of platonic love. It has always seemed to me utterly inconsequent to assume that attachments of this elevating and delightful description must needs lead to matrimony, which is a commonplace, hard-fact sort of business, with very little that is romantic about it; still, the unfortunate fact is that many women do take that erroneous view, and I hope every one who reads this will appreciate the delicacy which prompted me to give Southbank Cottage a wide berth for some days after the colloquy recorded above.

It was the more easy for me to do so because I was really a good deal occupied in entertaining shooting-parties, one of which Lord Pontefract, who

had just returned home, was pleased to grace with his presence. I must say that I was somewhat disappointed in Pontefract's personal appearance. He bore a striking resemblance to his father, who, I remember, was a very ugly man, with a sharp nose and squeezed-up eyes, like a fox terrier. To have had an ill-favoured father is one's misfortune, not one's fault; but I am not sure that having had an ill-mannered father is a sufficient excuse for being a boor, and it would be idle to deny that the present Lord Pontefract is a boor. While we were out shooting, he made some remarks to me about the paucity of birds which were not at all to my liking; also he spoke roughly to the keeper, who, being a short-tempered man, retorted with more candour than respect. The simple truth is that, both as regards partridge-shooting and pheasant shooting, there can be no sort of comparison between my property, which has been carefully preserved for years, and his, which has been totally neglected; and very sure was I (though I didn't say so) that if he had been upon his own domain that day, he would have gone home with an empty bag, instead of bringing down ten brace, which, I think, was pretty good considering the number of easy shots that he missed.

However, a man may be a poor shot, an uncompanionable fellow, and have a confoundedly ugly face to boot, without being necessarily devoid of those sterling qualities which, after all, are what one chiefly looks for and prizes in a son-in-law. This was what I endeavoured to bear in mind all day, and I believe that I behaved as a courteous host ought to do, notwithstanding some strong provocation; for much as I hate to praise myself, I think I may fairly claim to be somewhat unusually patient and amiable by nature. George Somers, it may be, was less richly dowered, or, perhaps, being still so young a man, he had not learnt the lesson of self-control. At any rate, he did not hit it off at all with Pontefract, and they were very nearly coming to high words more than once before the light began to fade and it was agreed that we should bend our steps homewards and have a cup of tea with the ladies.

As we drew near the house, Alma came out to meet us and inquire what sport we had had. Alma is nothing if not capricious. I suppose she can't have had any idea that I wished her to be civil to Lord Pontefract, or she never would have acted as she did and joined him, utterly ignoring the rest of us. But, of course, I was very pleased to see her

single him out in that marked way, and I made the other men wheel round and look at the sunset, so as to give this couple a few yards' start. Then, alas! occurred one of those unhappy incidents against which the utmost care cannot provide, and which I will venture to say that no man living could have foreseen. Alma, who has many pets, had lately become something of a pigeon-fancier, and it so happened that a number of these birds rose above the stable-yard while we were all trooping up the drive.

"What do you bet I don't kill a brace with two shots?" calls out that egregious ass Pontefract, raising his gun to his shoulder.

Alma sharply ordered him not to fire; George Somers sprang forward and addressed him in language which the exigency of the occasion might, perhaps, be held to excuse; but he paid no heed to either of them, and loosed off both barrels in quick succession. He missed with his first, but most unluckily his second proved more effective, and my daughter's stock of fantails, or blue rocks, or whatever they may have been (I know nothing about the creatures myself), was reduced by one.

After what I had seen of Pontefract's performances

during the day, I would have laid almost any odds on the bird; but his guardian angel or the deuce must have intervened, and I don't know when in my life I have been more vexed than when I saw Alma's flashing eyes fixed upon that booby's face. It was just the sort of offence which she was quite sure never to forgive. If I had not felt convinced of that at the first moment, I should have become so when I heard her cut short his half-laughing apologies with a chilling compliment upon his skill as a marksman. To be so cool she must have been very angry indeed, and I do not deny that she had some right to be angry.

Well, we went indoors and had our tea; very soon after which Pontefract got up and wished us good evening. Then the young people began to discuss him among themselves; and as they had nothing pleasant to say about him, and the moment did not seem precisely a favourable one for undertaking his defence, I silently withdrew. My intention was to smoke a quiet cigar in the garden; but the evening was a little chilly, and I had to walk fast to keep myself warm; and so, somehow or other, I found myself at Southbank Cottage long before my cigar was smoked out.

The craving for sympathy which had led me to turn my steps unconsciously in that direction would not suffer me to retrace them; so I rang the bell and was presently shown into the presence of Mrs. Somers, who remarked that she had been wondering what had become of me. I explained that my time had not been my own for the last few days, and then—being gently led on to do so—I told her the whole story of my project, and of the provoking check which it had received.

She did not seem to feel for me as much as I had anticipated that she would. She said it was very tiresome, no doubt, to have the success of one's scheme compromised in that way at the outset; but didn't I think that, after all, it might be a matter for congratulation if Lord Pontefract had displayed himself in his true colours before my daughter had had time to become attached to him?

I thought no such thing, and I am afraid that, in my natural irritation, I began my rejoinder by ejaculating "Fiddlesticks!" A foolish young fellow fires at a pigeon, which he cannot suspect of being a pet—for what reasonable being would make a pet of a pigeon?—and an equally foolish young woman immediately sets him down as a sort of murderer.

It is ridiculous to talk about a mischance of that kind causing a man to show himself in his true colours. The whole point of the thing is that it causes him to show himself in falsely dark colours.

But Mrs. Somers, when I had thus delivered myself, pursed up her lips and tapped her chin pensively with the fire screen which she was holding, and only murmured, "H'm!" It was evident that she was not able either to sympathise with or to advise me, so I changed the subject. I asked her whether she was going to Lady Pontefract's ball, and she said she was.

"Only because George insists upon it, though. My dancing days are over, alas! Yours, I presume, are not?"

I assured her that I should as soon think of standing on my head in the middle of the ball-room as of asking any one to join me in the *deux-temps* waltz which was in fashion fifteen or twenty years ago, and she rejoined, with a very pleasant smile, "Then, perhaps, I may hope that you will sit out a few dances with me, and we can watch the young ones together. I don't know that looking on is very good fun, but it is the only form of fun that is left to an old woman like me."

Well, I said what nobody, without manifest discourtesy, could have refrained from saying in reply. Possibly I may have overstepped the limits of prudence just a little bit; it is so difficult to keep those limits always in view! But I don't mind admitting that, as I walked home in the twilight, I said to myself: "Now, my dear boy, you must be more careful, you really must! If you don't look out what you are about, you will be getting into a mess again, as you have done so many times before. And then you will lay the blame upon circumstances, instead of blaming your own folly, as you ought."

I was a little hard upon myself in saying this, but then I am given to being hard upon myself. Perhaps it is an error on the right side.

One comfort was that Alma ceased to be afraid of Mrs. Somers at the very moment when I began to entertain some not unjustifiable apprehensions. Oddly enough, she had taken up the idea that Sinclair was a favoured suitor for the lady's hand, and, of course, it was not for me to point out to her what very slight evidence could be adduced in support of her conjecture. However, my supposed love-affairs and Sinclair's were of little enough consequence; what was really important was to ascertain how

Alma's were progressing, and this was just what I couldn't make out at all.

So far as Pontefract was concerned, the prospect was distinctly encouraging. He called twice between the day when he had shot the pigeon and the day of his mother's ball. On both occasions he was left alone with Alma for some little time, and while I was in the room she treated him with more civility than she is accustomed to show to people whom she dislikes or is affronted with. Yet I did not feel sure about her or at all easy in my mind. Alma has a propensity for sarcasm, inherited, I suppose, from her poor mother's family—there is nothing of the sort about me—and it distressed me to notice that she indulged this dangerous tendency of hers more than once during her intercourse with Pontefract. To be sure, he didn't detect it, and consequently was not disturbed by it, but it struck me as a bad sign. I took it into my head, I don't know why, that he meant to propose at the ball, and on the afternoon preceding it I grew so fidgetty and nervous that I could not resist opening the subject to my daughter, though I well knew that it was a hazardous experiment to make. She was out until quite late, so that I had not time to approach the

matter with all the circumspection that I could have desired; but, at any rate, I made my meaning and wishes clear, and so, I regret to add, did she.

"Lord Pontefract," Alma said concisely, "is a stupid, brutal savage. I would rather marry a red Indian, and far, far rather remain an old maid to the end of my days."

Now, I appeal to any fair-minded person— is that the sort of language to address to your father? Especially when he has done, and is doing, all that he possibly can to insure your happiness, present and future. To see a woman in tears is to me one of the saddest and most upsetting of spectacles. I would do almost anything to avoid it; yet there seem to be circumstances under which a father can't very well help making his daughter cry. I will not dwell further upon a painful scene. Suffice it to say that Alma and I had a quarrel, for which I would willingly admit myself in some measure to blame, were not such an admission too palpably nonsensical. We dined without exchanging a word, and drove off to the ball together in dignified sulks. I had, perhaps, some right to be sulky, since it was plain that I was not to have my own way; but why she should have sulked I am at

a loss to imagine. She says she didn't; she says she was only alarmed because of my violence; but really, that will *not* do!

I was so disheartened and dejected when we reached our destination that I went straight to Mrs. Somers to be comforted; and if I had had some reason to complain of lack of sympathy on her part before, I could bring no such charge against her now. She led me into a little secluded room and was most kind and consoling. I think we must have been talking nearly half-an-hour before that old horrid dread crept over me again, and I began to suspect that she was a little too kind. We were sitting hand in hand at the moment. It is an attitude which is frequently adopted by intimate friends, and I see no sort of harm in it myself; only I am not sure that one ought to keep on squeezing one's friend's hand every two or three minutes. I was just thinking that I had better regain possession of mine upon the pretext of wanting to blow my nose, when she made my blood run cold by whispering in insinuating accents, "Sir Richard, can you imagine a man being so modest, so foolishly modest, that he does not dare to ask for what he wants?"

There appeared to be no shadow of doubt but that

she was alluding to me. Modest, foolishly modest—it would be impossible to sum up my character more accurately in three words. Nevertheless, I am not in the habit of carrying modesty to the criminal pitch of asking for what I don't want, even. though such self-sacrifice should seem to be demanded of me.

"Indeed, my dear Mrs. Somers," I replied, with heartfelt earnestness, "I cannot conceive the state of things which you describe. To me it is absolutely inconceivable."

"And yet," she returned, "it is not uncommon; it is what one sees almost every day, particularly when the question is one of marriage. And if the poor man won't speak for himself—why, I suppose, somebody must speak for him."

I own that at this point I completely lost my head. All I could think of was that somehow, no matter how, she must be stopped. I explained, doubtless with some incoherence, that I was a disconsolate widower—a more or less disconsolate widower; that my daughter was all, or almost all, I had to live for; that her welfare had been for many years, and must continue to be, my chief object; that having no son, I had always regarded her as my heiress, and that, under no stress of temptation, however great, could

I think of ousting her from that position. It was a dreadful speech to have to make, and by the time that I had reached the end of it I was cold and damp from the crown of my head to the soles of my feet; but, plainly as I had spoken, I could hardly believe that Mrs. Somers had grasped my meaning, for there she sat, smiling away as sweetly and placidly as if I had been paying her compliments.

"Dear Sir Richard," she murmured, "what you say about your daughter is so nice, and I am sure it is true too. Whatever other people may assert about you, and whatever she herself may fear, I, for one, am convinced that you only wish to make her happy. And feeling as you do, I know you will easily understand how I feel about my dear boy. Do you know why I brought you into this little room, away from everybody else, Sir Richard?"

I thought I did; but it was obviously out of the question for me to say what I thought, so I made a sort of interrogative mumble, and she went on:

"You have been so very kind to dear George already, and now I want to ask you to do him and me one more great kindness—the last, I suppose, that we shall ever ask of you. Will you, Sir Richard?"

I perceived that she meant to let me off cheaply, and so grateful was I to her for her forbearance and good taste that I at once responded with fervour, "Dear Mrs. Somers, I will most cheerfully and joyfully do anything in the world for you that I have it in my power to do."

"How good you are!" she exclaimed. "But indeed it is no more than what I anticipated of you, and I daresay you are prepared for my humble request. George is over-sensitive and over-scrupulous, I think. He tells me that you yourself once went the length of saying to him that if he fell in love with an heiress it would be a very wrong and cruel thing to turn his back upon her just because she was an heiress; and although he has neither riches nor brilliant prospects, he is your daughter's equal in point of birth. And they are so devoted to one another——"

"Devoted to one another!" I interrupted; and possibly I may have added other ejaculations less unmeaning and more emphatic; for I was, as well I might be, terribly taken aback by this unexpected flank movement! But, like Herod, I had given a rash pledge to a lady, and she had no notion of allowing me to back out of it. I did not yield immediately; but

I yielded eventually, just as a stronger-minded and less unselfish man would have done, and Mrs. Somers explained to me how the young people had come to a mutual understanding that very afternoon, but had been too frightened of me (a likely story!) to come and beg for my consent in person.

Well, all things considered, I don't complain. At any rate, I had the unhoped-for treat of a pleasant drive home; and now that George Somers and Alma are married, I don't deny that I am very well satisfied with my son-in-law. It is understood, I believe, that when I die and Alma inherits this property, he will take my name; and that is more than Pontefract (who, by the way, is about to espouse the plain-featured but richly-dowered daughter of a gin-distiller) would have done.

But what I do deplore is the precipitate action of Mrs. Somers, who, almost immediately after her son's wedding day, went and married old Sinclair. I think it is a pity, I think it was uncalled for, and I can't but feel that I have been needlessly deprived of a charming neighbour. What her motives may have been for thus throwing herself away I don't pretend to say; she herself, I believe, talks about an attachment of long standing and so forth, which

shows at least that she considers her conduct in need of some elucidation. But Lady Pontefract, who may have been a trifle disappointed by the turn which matters took, laughs and looks knowing, and says Mrs. Sinclair is a very clever woman. It may be so; but I confess that I am unable to see it. She is a very agreeable woman and a very pretty woman; but why she should be called clever I do not know. I have narrated the facts exactly as they occurred, and I can only end, as I began, by saying that in my opinion it was a queer business. Of course I understand what Lady Pontefract means; but surely her theory is somewhat far-fetched. To suppose that George's mother deliberately settled in our neighbourhood with the intention of making a capital match for her son, that she managed to get the two young people to fall in love with each other, and that she extorted a reluctant assent from me by scaring me out of my senses—no, I really cannot suppose all that! Besides, the hypothesis would be too unflattering to my good friend Mrs. Sinclair.

CLEVER LADY SOPHIA.

About three o'clock in the morning two ladies muffled in wraps, were crossing the vestibule of a large London house, in which, as all the distracted neighbourhood knew, a ball was taking place. The elder was a somewhat insignificant-looking old woman, whose figure had lost all symmetry of outline, who was not too well dressed, and whose round face any stranger might have gazed upon without suspecting for a moment that it had once been the means of breaking the hearts of half the young men in London. That is very ancient history, remembered only by a few grey-haired old fogeys, who snigger when they think of it. Lady Sophia Wylie has broken no hearts for the last twenty or thirty years; or if she has broken any, it has not been by her personal charms that she has effected such disasters. Her daughter, who walked behind her, was tall, slim, graceful and so pretty as almost to de-

serve the epithet of beautiful. Indeed, she was frequently so described, although her celebrity may have been in some degree diminished by the fact that she was the youngest and last unmarried member of a family whose good looks had made them famous all over England. She held herself erect and carried her head high, as all her sisters do; she had the golden hair of a slightly reddish tinge, the blue eyes, the short upper lip, and the waxy complexion that they all have. Her features were, perhaps, not quite so regular as the Duchess of Grimsby's and Lady Southsea's, because a family type is apt to lose distinctness of outline by repetition; but some people thought that she had more expression than they.

Her expression at that particular moment was one of utter weariness. She had been taken to three balls that night; for weeks previous she had been going through the hard labour of a London season, and probably had not derived as much enjoyment from it as it is supposed to afford to *debutantes* in general. She looked sleepy and cross, and there is every reason to believe that her countenance faithfully reflected her sensations.

A young man who had been waiting about in the

hall advanced, with a certain perceptible diffidence, as the ladies emerged from the cloak-room. He was a handsome young man, dark-haired, broad shouldered, apparently well-bred; but he lacked that air of assurance which belongs to peers of the realm, elder sons, bankers, brewers and other distinguished persons. To the least experienced eyes it would have been obvious that he was not an eligible young man. Neither of the ladies took any notice of him, although he followed them closely down the steps and along the strip of red carpet which crossed the pavement beneath the awning; but when the elder lady dropped her fan, he darted forward with great agility, picked it up and handed it to her. "Your fan, Lady Sophia," said he.

Lady Sophia glanced over her shoulder and grabbed her property. "Oh!" she returned. And without vouchsafing him any further acknowledgment of his civility, she plunged, head first, into her carriage.

But the younger lady paused a moment, extending her hand to the handsome youth. Her face lighted up very prettily, as she said in a voice so gentle as to be almost a whisper, "Good-night." Then she followed her mother; the carriage-door

was shut with a slam, and away they went. What was it that those blue eyes of hers had expressed? Only compassion, perhaps; and yet a confident young man might have fancied that there was a suggestion of regret in them too. Our young man was not confident. He stood staring after Lady Sophia's hired landau until it vanished round the corner, then sighed profoundly and went back into the house with slow, heavy steps.

Now, supposing that, among the little knot of spectators congregated round the awning, there had been an individual of a slightly imaginative turn, one may guess that out of the scene above described he might easily have constructed a story—a story so common, so commonplace, that it is being repeated every day and every night, not in London only, but in every large city in the world; not in one rank of society, but in all. A careful mother, a portionless daughter, a young man of insufficient income—here are the materials for that romance which nature and circumstances are for ever creating, and for the usual melancholy result of which nobody seems to be justly open to blame. Really it cannot be helped. Young men of insufficient income ought to fall in love with heiresses; portionless young ladies ought

not to encourage young men of insufficient income; and it is the bounden duty of a careful mother to caution her daughter against reckless imprudence. The supposititious spectator might have divined without much difficulty what sort of conversation was going on inside the landau alluded to; and indeed his conjectures would not have been far wrong.

"Constance," says Lady Sophia, "I can't have you so much with that young Warrender. He is not at all desirable."

"I am sorry you don't like him," observes the young lady, talking through a yawn; "he dances very well."

"If he danced like the daughter of Herodias, it would make no difference. The man is a pauper!"

"He can't help that," remarks Miss Wylie.

"I don't know, I'm sure; and, for that matter, I don't care. And really, Constance, you must get out of the habit of contradicting every word that I say. When I tell you that Mr. Warrender is not desirable, that should be enough."

However, she did not seem to think that it was enough, for she went on scolding her daughter without intermission during the three or four minutes which the remainder of the drive occupied. Lady

Sophia knew how to scold. It was by no means the only thing that she knew, although, perhaps, it was the only thing that she knew thoroughly. Her friends and her enemies were agreed in speaking of her as a very clever woman, meaning probably that she had been a very successful one. She would have been less successful, it may be surmised, if she had had a softer heart and a gentler tongue. She was thought to have displayed great talent in capturing the Duke of Grimsby and Lord Southsea; but, as a matter of fact, these captures had demanded no talent at all. Both of the noblemen in question were rich men; they neither asked nor expected anything better than to obtain wives who were beautiful, amiable and as well born as they; the difficulty was to get beautiful, amiable and well-born girls to accept such husbands—for the Duke of Grimsby was old and ugly, and Lord Southsea's intemperate habits were notorious. "Sophia," said a certain elderly and cynical relative of hers, "never has had and never will have any trouble with her children. She has made home so infernally unpleasant for them that they would cheerfully marry a negro with a hump upon his back to escape from it." One's relations are not, as a rule, prone to taking too

lenient a view of one's character, and perhaps this was a little hard upon Lady Sophia. Certain, however, it is that her daughters had never disobeyed her, though they had wrangled a good deal with her before submitting to her behests. At the bottom of her heart she was rather afraid of Constance, who, unlike the others, did not wrangle, and who was accustomed to listen to her lectures in unbroken and disconcerting silence.

Constance, after remarking that Mr. Warrender danced well and could not justly be blamed for being a pauper, said nothing more on his behalf; and the consequence was that Lady Sophia's denunciations of him fell a little flat. Except defending a man whom nobody attacks, there is nothing more ridiculous than to attack a man whom nobody defends.

Now it so chanced that, while Lady Sophia and her daughter were discussing Mr. Warrender, that gentleman was discussing them. From the ball he went to his club, where he met his elder brother, to whom he sometimes confided his troubles, and who, being in the main a very good-natured elder brother, had more than once helped him out of those pecuniary difficulties into which younger

brothers are apt to fall. Into his patient ears he now poured the whole history of his hopeless attachment to the beautiful Miss Wylie. Of course, he said, it was a bad job. He couldn't feel a bit sure—though he had sometimes hoped—that the girl herself cared a little for him; but what was absolutely certain was that that old wretch of a mother of hers would be dead against him. Upon the whole, perhaps, he had better go and hang himself. Candidly now, what did his brother think?

Lord Warrender, a somewhat heavy young man of sporting proclivities, who did not go much into society, said he really didn't know. Shouldn't hang himself, anyhow. Thought that, by all accounts, Lady Sophia would be a confoundedly unpleasant mother-in-law, and doubted whether she would consent to be mother-in-law to any one under an earl. Couldn't Claud manage to fall in love with somebody else? On being emphatically assured that Claud could not by the wildest possibility ever love any woman save Constance Wylie, he scratched his head and made a grimace. No doubt Claud's allowance might be increased, and possibly that was what Claud was thinking; but the question was whether the old harridan (it was thus that Lord Warrender

stigmatised poor Lady Sophia in his own mind) would be satisfied with anything moderate in the shape of an allowance; and another question was whether the game was worth the candle. One may not be a particularly brilliant specimen of the hereditary legislator; but for all that, one is not, perhaps, quite such a fool as one looks. Therefore Lord Warrender committed himself to no rash promises; but presently he said:

"I'll tell you what; I wish you'd introduce me to these ladies. I might take soundings, don't you know—find out whether there's any chance for you, and—and that."

Claud jumped at the suggestion. After all, he was heir-presumptive to his brother, who was as rich as Crœsus, and whose dislike to female society was well known. "I should like nothing better," he declared. "Are you going to Lady Polkingham's to-morrow night?"

"Well, I wasn't," answered Lord Warrender, "but I can. I believe she sent me a card."

"That's all right, then," said Claud. "Lady Sophia will be delighted to know you, and you might talk to her about me, and make the best of me, you know. Irreproachable moral character—considerable talents

—likely to be in Parliament before long, and sure to get on—all that sort of thing. And then you could mention that I'm bound to come into a little money when old Granny dies, which is true, I suppose. She'll leave me something—a thousand pounds, most likely; but you needn't enter into particulars."

"I'll do what I can," Lord Warrender promised. "All the same, if you'll be advised by me, you'll give the thing up and go in for some other girl. There are such lots of them about."

"Wait till you're madly in love with one of them," returned his brother, "and then come and tell me what you think of the others."

"I don't think I'm over and above likely to fall in love with any of 'em," Lord Warrender said placidly. "Heaven preserve us from London girls!"

Wholesale condemnations of any class are usually traceable to insufficient acquaintance with that class. Lord Warrender did not know much of what he called "London girls" (by which he probably meant girls who had passed through a London season), and within twenty-four hours he was compelled to make a mental recantation so far, at least, as one individual was concerned.

Great was the surprise, and great also the satis-

faction, of Lady Sophia when, on the ensuing evening, the ineligible young man with whom she was acquainted led up to her the highly eligible young man with whom she was not. She was almost civil to the former for the sake of the latter. "The very husband for Constance!" was the thought that flashed instantaneously across her mind as Lord Warrender—tall, good-natured and rather sleepy-looking—came to a standstill before her and bowed. She had thought of several men who would do very well for Constance, but of none so entirely suitable as this. Lord Warrender had not only large estates, but was possessed of house-property in London and coal-mines in the North—a young man whom any mother in England would have rejoiced to press to her heart. Lady Sophia did not do anything so startling as that, but she took great pains to please him; she told him how well she had known his father and mother in years gone by, and reproached him in a friendly way for so seldom showing his face in society.

"Oh, well," he answered, "I do go to dinners; balls aren't much in my line. The fact is I'm a shocking bad dancer."

"Like most other people," said Lady Sophia.

'There aren't half-a-dozen good dancers in London. I don't suppose you would disgrace yourself if you had a decent partner. Let me introduce you to my daughter, who really does dance well. You may safely trust yourself to her guidance."

A few minutes after this Lord Warrender was passing through an agreeable and altogether novel experience; he was waltzing with Miss Wylie, and actually enjoying it. It was the first time in his life that he had enjoyed a waltz, and in the simplicity of his heart he told her so.

"Perhaps," she remarked gravely, "you have never before met anybody who could do your step."

"Have I got a step?" he asked. "I'm very glad to hear it. I shall know what to say the next time I go bumping round the room, and running into everybody. I can't be expected to steer people who don't understand my step, can I?"

"Of course not," said Miss Wylie; "but I don't think dancing is a particularly manly accomplishment, do you? One forgives a man for being a little awkward in a ball-room, if one knows that he can shoot, and ride, and—and fight."

This view of the whole duty of man was not displeasing to Lord Warrender, who happened to be

tolerably proficient in the three particulars specified. However, as he had a mind disposed towards equity, and as he recollected opportunely that he was where he was for the purpose of advancing his brother's interests, he said, "Well, there's no reason why a man shouldn't dance too, you know. Look at my brother Claud, for instance. He's about as keen a sportsman as you're likely to meet with, and yet he is one of the shining lights of London ball-rooms, they tell me."

"Yes," answered Miss Wylie, rather pensively, "I should think he would do everything well."

"Not that he's quite as good a shot as I am," Lord Warrender felt bound to add, in justice to himself. "I mean he ain't so certain, you know."

Miss Wylie had a little laugh at this. "What a funny thing it is," she said, "that you men are always accusing women of being jealous, and that it never occurs to you that you are just as bad as we are! You think yourselves far above any feeling of the kind because you don't envy a man who is better looking or better dressed than you are; but you ride jealous and you shoot jealous."

"Indeed, we do not!" interupted Lord Warrender, indignantly. "Now, upon my word, that's the most

unfair thing I ever heard said in my life! Some fellows may behave as you say; but they're quite exceptional, I assure you. Of course I know that I'm a pretty fair shot; and why shouldn't I say so? But I don't deny for a moment that there are two or three men who shoot a great deal better."

"As many as that?" asked Miss Wylie.

"Yes," answered Lord Warrender consideringly, "I could certainly name three. As for riding, I never pretended that I could ride. I go pretty straight it's true; but that is because I'm well mounted and don't funk. Now you may take my word for it Miss Wylie, that you'll find as little envy or jealousy in the hunting-field as in any assemblage of human beings that you can think of."

Thus began a conversation which Lord Warrender found extremely interesting, and in the course of which he clean forgot the existence of his younger brother. His companion made herself very agreeable to him; her remarks were shrewd and to the point; she put him at his ease, and he had the pleasing conviction that she liked him. In short, to use his own phrase, they "got on together like one o'clock." He never suspected that she had purposely led him on to discourse upon topics in which he might

be presumed to be at home; nor did he take any note of the rapid flight of time. While they were talking, several young men came up to claim promised dances and were dismissed with an innocent assurance on Miss Wylie's part that they must have made some mistake. Lord Warrender chuckled at their discomfiture. He had always been given to understand that it is a lady's prerogative to throw over unwelcome partners, and he would have been a greater stoic than he was if he had not been a little flattered by the implied compliment to himself. At length, however, Miss Wylie requested to be taken back to Lady Sophia, who received the errant couple with her most gracious smile.

"Well, Lord Warrender," said she, "has Constance succeeded in making a convert of you? Are you beginning to find out that dancing has some charms, after all?"

"Really, do you know, I think I am," Lord Warrender answered, laughing. "How many balls are you going to to-morrow night? Anywhere where I should have a chance of meeting you, if I turned up?"

"Sit down, and I'll try to remember," said Lady

Sophia. "Let me see; to-morrow is Thursday, isn't it?"

She began running over the list of her engagements; and while she was thus occupied Claud Warrender slipped up and led Miss Wylie away. It is not likely that this manœuvre escaped her ladyship's notice; but her brow remained unclouded. "Duty first, pleasure afterwards," she may have thought. It is a great mistake to spur a willing horse, and really dear Constance had behaved admirably that evening. Let her but agree to marry the right man, and she should be free to flirt with the wrong one to any extent in reason.

On the following morning the two brothers met. "How did you find Lady Sophia?" inquired the younger. "I needn't ask, though, for I saw her grinning and nodding her head at you like an old marionette. Did you manage to put in a word for me?"

"Well, no," answered Lord Warrender, penitently, "I'm afraid I didn't; the fact is she didn't give me much chance. I praised you up to the daughter, though."

"Oh, that wasn't necessary."

"It wasn't, eh? All right; I'll run you down the

next time I see her. I'll tell you what, Claud, that's the prettiest girl and—and the jolliest girl I ever met. I declare I almost wish I was in your shoes!"

"I wish I was in yours," returned Claud, laughing; "I shouldn't be much afraid of the old woman, then."

"Oh, I expect she'll come round all right," said Lord Warrender confidently. "She isn't such a bad sort of an old woman, you know."

"H'm! that depends upon who is talking to her," remarked Claud. "Anyhow, I hope you'll make her understand that *you* don't want to marry her daughter."

"Dear me!" said Lord Warrender, looking rather alarmed, "I trust she doesn't require any assurance of that kind."

He was by way of not being a marrying man. In former years all his friends and relations, beginning with his mother, had urged upon him somewhat too frequently and forcibly that it was the duty of a man in his position to marry. More than one lady, too, had striven hard to marry him; so that he had ended by becoming disgusted with marriage as an institution, and had withdrawn himself almost entirely from the society of ladies. Yet it crossed his

mind now that, supposing he ever should take a wife, he would like her to resemble Constance Wylie.

More than once in the course of a week that followed this passing notion of his recurred to him. He met Miss Wylie again and again; he danced with her repeatedly, and found not only that their steps accorded, but that her tastes and opinions agreed quite curiously with his own. He was conscious of a distinct sensation of displeasure when she said to him one evening, "How wise you are to remain single! You are such a thorough bachelor in all your ways that I can't fancy you domesticated."

This had hitherto been quite his own opinion; nevertheless, he could not help rejoining, "Oh, well, I don't know about that. I suppose if I met my affinity I could be as domestic as anybody else."

"Very likely: but I don't think you have met your affinity yet, Lord Warrender, and what I admire in you is, that you haven't allowed yourself to be drawn into matrimony by somebody who isn't your affinity. Upon second thoughts, though, I don't know why I should admire you. It is so simple not to propose to a woman whom you don't care for. That is a man's privilege, and one wonders

that men don't avail themselves of it more extensively."

"I always thought," observed Lord Warrender, "that it was a woman's privilege to refuse a man whom she didn't care for."

Miss Wylie laughed. "Oh, I don't think you can have believed that," she said. "Good as you are, and simple as you are, you must be aware that that privilege is reserved for heiresses."

Well, no doubt he was aware of it; and from this and other similar hints which she dropped, he was shrewd enough to perceive that she was alluding to her own case. Most people, when they utter oracular generalities, do mean to allude to their own case. Yet he could not quite bring himself to say (as possibly she may have wished him to say) that he knew she was attached to his brother, and that he was ready to provide for his brother to such an extent as to bring that young gentleman's marriage with his supposed affinity within the range of conceivable events. For one thing, he did not know positively that Miss Wylie regarded his brother as her affinity; and Claud had told him somewhat arrogantly that his cause required no pleading in that quarter. He avoided mentioning Claud's name to her. He was

prepared, when matters should become further advanced—if ever they did become further advanced—to behave loyally and generously; but in the meantime he did not see that he could be of much service.

In short, before a fortnight had elapsed Lord Warrender was over head and ears in love with the beautiful Miss Wylie. For this it must be admitted that he was in no way to blame. A man can't help falling in love; and the simple truth is, that he was unconscious of any such catastrophe having befallen him. All he knew was that he was charmed and happy in Miss Wylie's society, that he looked forward to encountering her at the entertainments which he had taken to frequenting, and that the days on which he failed to meet her were dull and blank days for him. One might say as much as that about one's grandmother, supposing one's grandmother to be a singularly fascinating and sympathetic person.

But it is hardly necessary to add that this innocent and childlike view of the situation was not participated in by those who saw Lord Warrender devoting himself, night after night, to the fair *débutante;* and at length a time came when the opinions of a censorious world were revealed to him

with startling abruptness. At a ball, one evening, he was meditatively watching Claud and Miss Wylie waltzing together and was wishing in a vague way that nature had bestowed upon him as handsome a face as his brother's, when Lady Sophia beckoned to him to approach.

"Lord Warrender," said she, after moving away her dress, so as to admit of his sitting down beside her, "I want to have a little talk with you. I have noticed—and I am sure it has been a great pleasure to me—that you and dear Constance have become fast friends. You are always together; you dance continually with her, and I think you admire her very much, don't you?"

"Nobody can admire your daughter more than I do, Lady Sophia," responded Lord Warrenden, with much heartiness: for, oddly enough, he had not the least suspicion of what was coming.

"I am quite convinced of that; and—well, and so are other people. You must not mind my dispensing with ceremony: it is so often the best and kindest thing to do. And I dare say you will understand that, situated as I am, I am obliged sometimes to say things which I should be contented with thinking, if dear Constance's father were still alive. Now,

you know, Lord Warrender, you have been dancing a great deal with Constance, and people have begun to talk. In fairness to her I feel that I ought to tell you this."

"I'm—I'm awfully sorry—I won't do it again," gasped Lord Warrender, utterly taking aback.

If he had been looking at Lady Sophia, instead of at the floor, he would have seen an ominous change come over her face; but it was in her most dulcet tones that she rejoined: "Dear Lord Warrender, why should you not do it again? If you feel as I think—as I am sure you do, you have only to say so, and then you will be able to dance with her as much as you like."

"Good gracious!" ejaculated the astounded individual to whom this direct invitation was addressed. He had heard, in novels and plays, of men being asked their intentions, but had always supposed that, if such unpleasant experiences ever took place in real life, they were confined to lower middle-class society. He was considerably alarmed, but he was also angry; and it was the predominance of the latter emotion that enabled him to reply:

"You are making a great mistake, Lady Sophia, As I told you before, I admire Miss Wylie immense-

ly, and if I were a marrying man—but I am not a marrying man; and, in any case, I couldn't think of offering myself to her; because I suspect—in fact, it's as plain as can be—that she is likely to become engaged to my brother before long."

Lady Sophia broke into a shrill laugh. "How ridiculous!" she cried. "You are far too modest, Lord Warrender; and you may take my word for it that Constance is about as likely to become engaged to your brother as to the man in the moon. No: I don't think you will find your brother a very formidable rival."

"There is no question of rivalry in the matter," returned Lord Warrender rather crossly, as he got up. "We'll say no more about it, if you don't mind."

"Just as you please," answered Lady Sophia, with undiminished sweetness; "only I must remind you once more that I am bound to consider what other people say, and I know that if they see you dancing with Constance as you have done lately, they will say that you are engaged her. Indeed, that is what I myself shall conclude if you dance with her again."

Lord Warrender swallowed down an uncivil retort, made a little bow and walked straight out of the room. "So there's an end of *that!*" he solilo-

quised, as he drove away. "No more dancing for me, thank you! I'm sorry for it—sorry for the poor girl too, to have a mother of that kind. What an unprincipled old creature! I suppose she thought I was such a fool that it didn't matter how openly she played her cards with me."

Nobody likes to be thought a fool or to be treated as such, and, without entertaining any exalted opinion of his own wisdom, Lord Warrender was a good deal annoyed by Lady Sophia's cool assumption that he was a man whom no skill was required to bring to book. "You don't quite know me yet, my lady," thought he to himself, as he told his servant to pack up his things and engage berths on board the steamer which was to sail for Christiansand on the following day. He had a river in Norway and a small house adjacent thereto, whither he was accustomed to betake himself every year in the month of June, with contemptuous disregard of the London season. This year he had postponed his departure, having found the season not wholly devoid of attractions; but now there was nothing to keep him any longer away from the salmon, and off he went, despatching a few valedictory lines to his brother:—

"DEAR CLAUD,—I'm afraid I can't help you much with Miss Wylie. You were right about Lady Sophia; she is a detestable old hag, and I shouldn't wish to have her for a mother-in-law myself. However, if you can see your way at all, and if it is a question of money, let me know. I'll do what I can for you, within ordinary limits; but I still think you had better try to fall in love with somebody else.

I'm off to Norway to fish. Very glad to see you, if you care to come over. Yours affectionately, W.

This rather heartless missive met with no response; nor did any of the other men to whom Lord Warrender had hastily telegraphed an offer of hospitality see fit to avail themselves of it. But that did not distress him particularly; for he was a man to whom sport was all-sufficient. At any rate, he had hitherto found it so; and that he did not find it so now was a circumstance which gave him matter for grave reflection. To play a gigantic salmon for two hours, to lose him in the very moment of victory and to feel that so frightful a calamity leaves you perfectly cool, calm, and indifferent, is as every fisherman will admit, a sign of mental derangement which demands careful looking into. Lord Warrender had not been a week in Norway

when he passed through this strange experience; and, as self-deception was not among his capacities, he very soon found out what was wrong with him. There was no doubt about it: he was in love with Constance Wylie, the girl of his brother's heart—the girl who, as he could not but guess, would easily be induced to marry him under pressure of maternal solicitude.

Does such a situation present any real difficulty?—and can there be a shadow of a doubt as to what was Lord Warrender's duty, under the circumstances? Of course, to us dispassionate outsiders there can be none. We should scorn to be accepted for the sake of our rank or our wealth (if we had those advantages); we should consider ourselves bound to give way to our younger brother (if we possessed such an incumbrance), and to remain resolutely in the background at least until his fate should be decided. Nevertheless, it is probable that, were we to find ourselves in Lord Warrender's position, *advocatus diaboli* would be able to meet us with very plausible representations. There was nothing to prove that Miss Wylie was in love with Claud Warrender; there were excellent reasons for believing that she would be happy as the wife of his elder brother, and some for

doubting whether she would be happy as the wife of a man whose character was not remarkable for steadiness or solidity. And then came the final, overwhelming argument: "I never was really in love before in my life; I never shall love any other woman as I love her. Hang it all! haven't I the right to fight my own battle? And is it my fault if Claud and I don't take the field upon exactly even terms?"

But one of the great benefits of a healthy, open-air existence is that it keeps a man sane in body and mind. Lord Warrender fought the devil for three weeks in those Norwegian solitudes, and worsted him At the end of the struggle he was not certain that he would not be morally justified in giving his brother due notice and then entering into competition with him; but he was quite certain that he could not adopt that course. "There are some things that a fellow can't do, don't you know?" was his mental summing up of the question.

Having made up his mind, he became easier. He had a lingering hope, to which he was fairly entitled; but he was fully determined to keep his promise to Claud. Should the latter's marriage prove to be contingent upon an increase of income, an increase

of income should be forthcoming. More than that he could hardly do or say; and more, it might be assumed, would not be expected of him.

Apparently, not even so much as that was expected of him. He spent the summer and autumn in his usual fashion, shooting grouse in Yorkshire, stalking in Scotland, distinguishing himself among the pheasants in Norfolk and finally taking up his quarters at Melton and settling down to the serious business of hunting for the winter. During all this time he heard nothing of Lady Sophia and her daughter and only received one communication from his brother, who was a poor correspondent. Claud wrote in November to decline an invitation to join a shooting-party, and merely made a passing allusion to his amatory troubles. All that he said upon this subject was contained in a single brief paragraph at the end of his letter;—"I haven't taken your good advice and transferred my affections, though there isn't the ghost of a hope for me so long as old Lady Sophia lives—and, like Auld Robin Gray's wife, she's 'no like to dee.' I met them at a country house last week. People tell me that she had set her heart on catching you last season, and was awfully sold when you bolted off to Norway

in such a hurry. I dare say you've forgotten all about last season, though."

Lord Warrender had forgotten nothing. He tossed the letter aside with an impatient exclamation. "I think Claud ought to do one thing or the other," he muttered. "It would be rather hard if, after all, some third person should step in and quietly bear away the prize."

However, he had resolved in his dogged, phlegmatic way that he would not intervene until he could do so with a clear conscience. So he went on with his hunting, and enjoyed himself after a fashion; and the winter passed away and the spring came, bringing an end of hunting, and nothing for an occupationless sportsman to do but to adjourn to the metropolis. Lord Warrender hated London, and it has already been said that he hated balls; yet, in this particular year, he removed himself and his belongings to the family mansion in Portland Place, in a corner of which he dwelt, with a certain alacrity; and the very first invitation to a ball which he received he accepted.

He had a distinct and perfectly legitimate hope in his mind when he did so. Honour did not compel him to avoid all occasions of seeing Miss Wylie; and

his fate decreed that before he had been five minutes in the ball-room he should be accosted by Lady Sophia. The frank cordiality of her greeting took him by surprise. He had not expected a very kindly reception at her hands after his behaviour of the preceding season; but it seemed that he had done her an injustice.

"So we meet again at last, Lord Warrender!" she exclaimed, while she held his hand. "And where have you been hiding yourself all this long time? Come and give me an account of your proceedings."

Lord Warrender obeyed wonderingly. "And you?" he asked, when he had concluded a succinct recital—"where have you been, and what have you been doing? And—er—how is Miss Wylie?"

He was unable to put this last question with all the cheerful indifference which he had intended to throw into his voice. It was the only one of the three which Lady Sophia thought it necessary to answer.

"As well as possible, thanks," she said. "There she is. Don't you think she looks well?"

Constance floated past them at the moment. She was laughing at something that her partner was saying to her; she was more beautiful than ever if

that could be; she seemed to be in high spirits and had apparently not a care in the world.

"Yes," answered Lord Warrender, with a smothered sigh; "she looks very well." Lady Sophia's countenance assumed an expression of innocent maternal pride. Her eyes followed her daughter for a few moments, and then she said softly: "Aren't you going to dance with her to-night? She used to be your instructress last year—do you remember?"

He remembered it very well; and he also remembered what he had been told would be the consequence of his dancing with her again. Did Lady Sophia remember her own words? He was half-inclined to remind her of them, but, after an instant's hesitation, decided that he wouldn't. She seemed disposed to let bygones be bygones, and, for his own part, he had no wish to drag painful reminiscences from the oblivion to which they were best consigned. Besides, he was conscious of a great longing to waltz just once more with Constance. "It shall only be once," he said to himself; "and I won't try to meet her again—at any rate, until I know for certain whether Claud is really out of the running or not."

The upshot of this was that, a few minutes later,

he was careering round the room in the headlong fashion which he so greatly enjoyed, and to which the lady who had the honour of being his unique partner contrived to accommodate herself with as much skill as of yore. Her manner was friendly, if not quite as cordial as her mother's; she made his heart sink by blushing a little when he casually introduced his brother's name into the conversation; but indeed she did not seem to be listening very attentively to what he was saying, and he noticed a look of disquietude and apprehension on her face.

"I wish people wouldn't stare at us so!" she exclaimed, when the dance was over. "Is it at me or at you that they are looking, do you think?"

"Oh, I expect it's at me," answered Lord Warrender, laughing; "I'm a sort of a dancing bear, don't you know?"

"This is our dance, Miss Wylie," interposed an eager young man, who had pushed his way through the crowd, and who looked as if he rather anticipated a struggle for his rights.

Miss Wylie, however, did not dispute the assertion. She took the new-comer's arm at once, and her late partner, falling back a few paces, suddenly

found himself shaking hands with Lady Sophia. Why was he shaking hands with her? He had done that already; but, of course, if she wished to repeat the ceremony, it was not for him to disappoint her.

"My dear Lord Warrender," she was saying affectionately, "I am so glad! so very glad! But not surprised; for I quite expected it. Such a pretty way of letting us all know! And everybody says you and Constance will make quite an ideal couple —so admirably suited to one another in all respects!"

Lord Warrender was just the sort of man to come out strong in a moment of emergency. His intellect was not a great one; but he had iron nerves, and never lost his presence of mind. "I see," said he quietly, "you stick to what you said a year ago, and take my dancing with your daughter as equivalent to an offer of marriage. And you have been round the room, announcing the engagement to your friends."

Lady Sophia nodded smilingly; but there was just a shadow of apprehension in her eyes. Perhaps she had not anticipated quite so ready an acquiescence. "It is always better to make these

things known at once," said she; "then people can't gossip any more. They have gossipped a great deal you know, and the affair has been going on *rather* a long time, hasn't it? We can't talk here; but you will come and see us to-morrow, won't you?"

"Perhaps," answered Lord Warrender, gravely. "Anyhow, we shall meet to-morrow night at Brentford House. In the meantime I may as well tell you—or perhaps I needn't tell you?—that I have not proposed to Miss Wylie."

With that he turned on his heel and made for the door. But although he meant to leave the house before any one should have time to thrust congratulations upon him which might be awkward to reply to, he did not mean to go away alone. He had caught sight of his brother standing among several non-dancers, and on his passage he took the younger man by the arm. "Come home with me, Claud," he whispered; "I want to speak to you."

Shortly afterwards the two brothers were in Lord Warrender's smoking-room in Portland Place. They had not exchanged a word during the short time; but now Claud, whose face was very pale, said, before taking the arm-chair which was pushed towards him;

"Look here, Warrender; I suppose I can guess what you are going to say. There's a rumour that you are engaged to Constance Wylie."

Lord Warrender lighted a cigar deliberately. "Are you in a position to forbid the banns?" he inquired.

"No," answered the other, "I am not. She won't be able to hold out against her mother. She says she will; but I know better. Perhaps she may not give in to-morrow or next week or even next month; but she will be beaten in the long run. So, if you like the idea of marrying a girl who doesn't love you, and who does love me, you have only to sit still and wait."

Lord Warrender drew a long breath. "I shouldn't like that idea," he observed calmly. "I suppose, from your saying that she loves you, you and she have come to an understanding."

"If you can call it an understanding. I know that she loves me, because I have heard it from her own lips; but it's a perfectly hopeless case. I have a little over a thousand a year of my own, and no prospects. Even if you increased my income, as you were kind enough to say that you would do—even if you doubled it—it would make no difference.

I was obliged to tell her that she was free, so far as I was concerned."

"After drawing a confession of love from her?"

"I couldn't help that, Warrender."

"Well, I dare say not; most likely I should have done the same thing in your place. Now listen to me, Claud, and let us see whether between us we can't outwit her ladyship, who, I must say, strikes me as being too clever by half."

Thereupon Lord Warrender briefly related the circumstances which had brought about his so-called engagement to a lady whom he declared that he had not the least intention of marrying. The conference which ensued was somewhat lengthy; but it appeared to have a satisfactory termination; for when the brothers parted the younger shook the elder warmly by the hand, exclaiming, "Upon my word, Warrender, you're the best fellow out!"

"Glad you think so," answered Lord Warrender, with a slight smile.

Perhaps Claud would have thought his brother an even better fellow if the whole truth had been told; but there are truths which it is desirable, if not essential, to conceal.

Lady Sophia arrived at Brentford House on the

following evening with an unruffled exterior, but with a mind ill at ease. Lord Warrender had not called upon her during the day; she had passed through a painful scene with Constance, who had shown a mutinous spirit, and had addressed her most disrespectfully; and what future troubles might lie before her, she hardly dared to think. The moment that she entered the ball-room she looked anxiously round it in search of her prospective son-in-law; but he was not there, and she had to wait a whole hour before her eyes were gladdened by the sight of his tall figure advancing through the doorway, followed by that of his younger brother. He marched straight up to her, and, without wasting time upon preliminaries, plunged into the subject which was uppermost in the thoughts of both of them.

"Lady Sophia," said he, "I have been turning over in my mind what you said last night, and although, when I asked Miss Wylie to dance with me I did not intend asking her to be my wife, I suppose I can't honourably back out of an engagement which you have chosen to make public. One thing, however, I must warn you of, and that is that I have naturally a very jealous and suspicious

temper. I don't know that Miss Wylie cares for me, nor have I the slightest ground for supposing that she does. Therefore, if, after this, I see her dancing twice consecutively with any man, I shall take it for granted that she is in love with that man. What is sauce for the goose (you think me a goose, don't you?) is sauce for the gander, and I don't see why tests that are made to apply to me shouldn't apply to others."

"How absurd!" exclaimed Lady Sophia. "Of course I will tell Constance what you say, and if you choose, she shall give up dancing altogether; but really your suspicions are utterly unfounded."

"Do you mean to tell me, Lady Sophia, that your daughter is in love with me?"

Lady Sophia hesitated. She was playing an audacious game and had already obtained what she believed to be a signal success; but she well knew that some hard battles remained to be fought and that it behoved her to be circumspect. "Constance," she began, "is very modest and very timid—so unlike most girls of the present day! You must not expect her to rush into your arms."

After this preface, she entered upon a lengthy

exposition of the peculiarities of modest and timid characters, to which her neighbour lent a somewhat inattentive ear. He was watching Miss Wylie, who was leaving the ball-room at the conclusion of a dance, on his brother's arm, and the moment that he saw her reappear with the same partner he moved abruptly away.

He had made his entrance without greeting his hostess; he now hastened to repair this omission. The Duchess of Brentford, who was surrounded by a phalanx of dowagers, held out her hand to him as he approached and said exactly what he had expected her to say—"So I hear we are to congratulate you, Lord Warrender. You are a very fortunate man, I think."

"Eh?—congratulate me?" repeated Lord Warrender, assuming a puzzled look. "Oh! I see what you mean; but you're putting the saddle on the wrong horse, Duchess. It's my brother who is engaged to Miss Wylie; I thought everybody knew that I am a confirmed bachelor."

The Duchess looked astonished, but not convinced. "Really?" said she; "and yet it was Lady Sophia herself who told me."

"You must have misunderstood her; she said

Claud Warrender, not *Lord* Warrender. For goodness' sake, correct the report, or everybody will say I've been thrown over, and then I shall have all the old women in London trying to console me."

He corrected it himself in several instances before he rejoined Lady Sophia, by whose side he sank down with a sigh of relief.

"Lady Sophia," said he, "prepare yourself for a shock. I am not going to marry your daughter, and my brother Claud is. She has danced with him twice running, and, as I told you I should, I take that as a sign that she is in love with him. Besides, it's the truth. I have borrowed a leaf out of your book and been round the room telling everybody that they are engaged; I said your announcement of last night had been misunderstood. Don't screech or make a row until you have heard what I have to say, please; you can't get out of it, and you may as well make the best of it. There's a property in Warwickshire, left me by my uncle, and worth from six to seven thousand a year, which I mean to hand over to Claud. It ought to have gone to him any way; I'm sure I don't want it; it takes me all my time to live in the houses that I've got. And that isn't all. I have reasons which I am not going to tell you, but

which are perfectly respectable reasons, for thinking that I shall never marry, and Claud, as you know, is heir-presumptive. I'm a thundering bad rider; I never look where I'm going, and an accident might happen any day, don't you see?"

Lady Sophia bit her fan, and looked pensive. Seven thousand a year is very far from being the same thing as seventy thousand; yet in these hard times one may have to put up with less. And then, the possibilities!

"Oh!" said Lord Warrender, with a laugh. "I don't promise to break my neck, you know; but it's an imaginable contingency, and you can keep up your spirits by thinking about it. Now, Lady Sophia, I hope we shall remain friends. Very few things are worth quarrelling over, and, for my part, now that I've paid you out in your own coin, I don't bear malice. Only you really shouldn't be so awfully clever."

He slipped away without waiting for a rejoinder, and soon found an opportunity of offering his congratulations to his future sister-in-law, whose eyes expressed the thanks which her lips had some difficulty in framing.

Thus was accomplished a sacrifice the existence

of which has never been suspected. Lady Sophia, perceiving that under no circumstances could she hope to recapture the elder brother, was fain to content herself with the younger, and before the close of the season Constance Wylie became Mrs. Warrender.

Her husband has entered Parliament, and is likely to make a career for himself; both his future and hers, as far as appearances go, will be prosperous and happy. Lord Warrender has not yet broken his neck; but perhaps it would be rash to affirm that his heart is equally intact. Broken hearts are not always made manifest to the world by pale cheeks and haggard looks; and indeed a man who has suffered the loss of his capacity for falling in love may lead a wholesome, useful and not altogether disagreeable life, just as he may after the loss of an arm or a leg.

POOR HARRY.

One Sunday morning, in the month of July, 1883, a dreadful thing happened at the parish church of Motcombe Regis during divine service. The Rector had selected for his text that passage from the epistle of St. Paul to the Colossians in which the Apostle exhorts his followers to set their affections on things above, not on things of the earth, and he was, as usual, jogging along quite comfortably towards his application, while two-thirds of the congregation—also as usual and quite as comfortably—had composed themselves to sleep, when he and they were startled by a clear young voice, coming from the west end of the building, which called out audibly, "That's a lie!"

If one were put upon one's oath as an accurate historian, one would be compelled to add that the word "lie" was preceded by a forcible and profane

adjective; but really the ejaculation is quite bad enough as it stands; and what made it the more unpardonable was that it was altogether inappropriate. For what was poor Mr. Staddon saying when he was thus scandalously interrupted? Why, simply that the objects upon which we are apt to set our affections here below are as often as not those which, if granted to us, would by no means promote our happiness, and that most of us have very good reason to be thankful for our disappointments. That, surely, is a truth so elementary that nobody could lose much by having slept through the enunciation of it, and that its enunciator might fairly expect it to pass unchallenged under any circumstances. Harry Lear, however, thought differently, and took the unheard-of course of expressing his dissent in the manner described.

Well, he was hustled out of church by two of his friends (who, perhaps, made rather more noise over it than was necessary), and nobody fell asleep again, and the Rector, in a somewhat trembling voice, brought his discourse to a conclusion.

The Rector, good man, was terribly upset by this episode, the remembrance of which made him miserable throughout the rest of the day. He had

some rough fellows in his parish, and though none of them had ever gone the length of creating a disturbance in church, he would not have been so very much surprised if they had, because, in truth, their respect for authority was small, especially since certain political agitators had come down to turn their heads with harangues about the rights of labour and the nationalisation of the land. But that Harry Lear, who had sung in the choir as a boy, whom he himself had prepared for confirmation, and whom he had firmly believed to be a fine, steady, manly lad—that Harry Lear, of all people, should so grossly misconduct himself was sad and inexplicable indeed. Or rather, it was not exactly inexplicable; only the explanation—the sole conceivable explanation—was almost as distressing as the offence; for very evident it was to the Rector that Harry, when he had come to church that day, must have had too much to drink.

Mr. Staddon was a bachelor. It is possible that if he been a married man, his inductive capacities would have been less limited, and it is also possible that in that case his disposition to condone such sins as drunkenness and profanity would have been a shade less ready. Not, indeed, that he

underrated the heinousness of these crimes, but he could make more allowance for temptation than ladies are generally supposed to do; besides which, it was his creed that genuine and hearty repentance is the utmost that one erring mortal ought to demand of another. Now when he awoke on the Monday morning he was as sure as he could be of anything that Harry Lear must by that time be sincerely penitent; and so after breakfast he set forth to rebuke the delinquent with a tolerably confident expectation of receiving the apology which was his due.

He tramped briskly downwards across the heathery moorland (for Motcombe Regis stands high upon the hill country on the borders of Devon and Cornwall), his black coat tails fluttering and his long grey hair blown back from his rosy cheeks, as he met the west wind, until he reached that sunny and sheltered ravine which old Mr. Lear, by the indefatigable industry of a lifetime, had succeeded in converting into the most prolific market garden for many miles round. There, as he had anticipated, the first person whom he saw was old Mr. Lear himself; and old Mr. Lear, on descrying his visitor, stuck his fork into the manure-heap upon which he

had been engaged, straightened his bent back, raised his forefinger to the brim of his battered hat and said, "Mornin', sir."

"Good morning, Mr. Lear," returned the Rector. "This is a bad business. I did not see you in church yesterday; but your wife, I believe, was there, and you must have heard what occurred. It is a most disgraceful affair—most disgraceful and shameful!"

Mr. Lear dropped his arms upon the gate which separated him from his interlocutor. He was a little wizened old man—aged rather by toil and exposure than by time—who at all seasons and in all weathers wore a tall hat, a waistcoat with black calico sleeves, corduroy breeches and leather gaiters. "So 'tis, sir," he agreed, in the tone of an impartial observer of men and things. "Aw, yis, 'tis shameful, sure enough."

"So much so," continued the Rector, "that I am certain Harry would never have behaved in such a way if he had been in his sober senses. But that, you see, unfortunately brings us to the conclusion that he was *not* sober."

Mr. Lear shook his head decisively. To begin with, his boy was no drunkard; in the second place,

he had had no opportunity of getting drunk on the previous day; thirdly and lastly, he certainly had not been drunk.

"Well, but, Mr. Lear, if he was not intoxicated, he knew what he was doing; and what motive can you suggest for his having insulted me, and, what is far worse, insulted his Maker as he did?"

"Well," answered Mr. Lear, slowly drawing his hand across his chin, which had been shaved twenty-four hours before and was therefore less stubbly than usual, "'tis a long story to tell 'ee, sir, and I don't know as I could tell it rightly if I was to try; but to cut it short, what he's got in his mind is to 'list for a sodger. Goin' down to Plymouth and seein' of the redcoats maybe—*I* don't know—and his mother she's mortal angry with him, and won't so much as hear it spoke of."

"No wonder!" ejaculated the Rector. "Dear dear, I'm very sorry to hear this. Still, I don't quite see how it accounts for his conduct."

"Don't know as it does, sir; but there's been a deal o' talk and hargyment, and his mother, bein' such a pious woman and a bit fond of her own way tu, as I'm bound to own—what I mean to say, a

young feller as 'd like to have *his* own way might be druv to desp'rate courses."

"I see," said the Rector meditatively; "you think he deliberately behaved in such a way as to make his mother ashamed to keep him in the parish. But surely, Mr. Lear, you yourself can't wish your only son to go away and leave you in your old age!"

To this Mr. Lear made no reply. He had taken up his fork again and was casting manure to right and left of him in a somewhat reckless fashion. He was evidently agitated, but did not seem desirous of expressing any sentiments of his own upon the subject.

"Well," said the Rector after a pause, "I daresay, I had better speak to Harry himself."

Mr. Lear silently intimated his concurrence in that view. "Though the boy did ought to beg your pardon, sir," said he; "yis, that he did."

The Rector made his way through the gooseberry and currant bushes to the one-storeyed white house, the interior of which was always kept in a condition of such scrupulous cleanliness by Mrs. Lear. He found that thin, hard-featured woman in the kitchen, where it was plain that she had been expecting his viist, and where, after dusting a wooden chair for

him with her apron, she listened in ill-disguised impatience to his introductory remarks.

"'Tis all along o' that gell, sir!" she broke in long before he had finished what he had to say. "Who be she, I'd like to know, to turn up her nose at her betters? But Harry he's been fairly mazed ever since she began to cold-shoulder him, and now he don't think no more o' dissecrating the Lord's house than he do of breakin' his mother's heart."

"Oho!" said the Rector, smiling; "so there's a young woman at the bottom of it, is there? I might have guessed as much. And pray who is this young woman?"

"Oh, la!—there!" exclaimed Mrs. Lear with a snort (for, although she was a zealous Churchwoman, she was well aware that respect for Mr. Staddon's sacred calling was compatible with a poor opinion of his individual perspicacity), "'tis that Bella Harvey, the schoolmissus, as everybody in the parish knows. And I on'y wish she'd stopped down to Plymouth, where she got the book-larnin' she's so proud about, 'stead o' comin' back here to make all this mischeef."

"Isabella Harvey?" said the Rector. "A most respectable girl and a very efficient teacher. I am

sorry Harry has been unsuccessful; but I applaud his choice—I applaud his choice."

This made Mrs. Lear very angry, and as she had always a fine flow of language at command, she proceeded for the best part of a quarter of an hour to descant upon the demoralising effects of "eddication" in general and its evil consequences as exemplified in the case of Bella Harvey in particular, while the Rector drummed upon the table with his fingers and smiled and let her talk on. He did not contradict her, but when she paused to take breath he got up and said he thought he would go and try to find Harry. In truth the good man was not displeased by what he had heard. This reckless conduct and this talk about enlisting were foolish enough, no doubt: but, since they had their origin in an honest love-affair, there was hope for the offender.

However, the matter was more serious than he imagined, and he changed his point of view after a few minutes' conversation with Harry, whom he discovered in the orchard. That blue-eyed, curly-headed young giant was sitting idly under an apple-tree, his back resting against the trunk, his legs stretched out before him and his hands thrust into

his pockets. He did not get up nor did he express any contrition for what he had done.

"I've said it, and I won't take it back," was his dogged reply to what, considering all things, was not a very severe lecture. "I don't see no manner o' good in telling people that curses is blessings. 'Taint true—and they know it—and you know it."

"Harry, Harry!" said the Rector sorrowfully, "I never thought to hear you speak like that to me. I may have failed in my duty as a parish priest, and I am afraid you are a proof that I have failed; but at least you ought to know that I would not wilfully say from the pulpit what I believed to be untrue."

Then Harry rose to his full height of six foot two, while a distressed look spread itself over his handsome face. "What be I to do, sir?" he exclaimed. "Father knows how 'tis with me; but mother she won't see it; and I don't want to run away from home like a thief. Where's the shame of serving Her Majesty? 'Tis better to do that than to stop on here and go to the devil—as I should. The devil's in me, sir, and that's all about it. If ever I'm to drive him out again 'twon't be by hoeing taters nor yet by carryin' vegetables to Plymouth market."

Well, the Rector got his apology out of this graceless parishioner after all. Harry admitted that he had behaved abominably, but thought it quite likely that he might behave worse if he were constrained to remain at Motcombe Regis against his will; and indeed Mr. Staddon was inclined to think so too. Whether the poor lad had really been jilted by Miss Isabella Harvey or whether he had allowed himself to entertain unwarranted hopes it was not easy to determine; but what was very evident was that he had in him a great store of energy for good or for evil, and that that store imperatively demanded an outlet. That any adequate outlet could be afforded by the pursuit of market-gardening seemed most improbable; and so, after a discussion somewhat too lengthy to be reported here, the Rector was fain to range himself upon the young man's side. Other discussions far more lengthy and far more stormy followed as a matter of course, but the end of it was that Mrs. Lear's opposition was overcome and that she acquiesced tearfully and reproachfully in a decision the entire responsibility for which she cast upon the Rector's shoulders.

The Rector, for his part, did not under-estimate the responsibility and was far from happy in accepting

it. Certainly there is no shame in serving the Queen, but only a very small part of a soldier's life is usually spent in fighting the Queen's enemies, and Mr. Staddon dwelt in the neighbourhood of a garrison town. He was a bachelor; his parishioners, and especially his grown-up choir-boys, were like his own children; it was impossible for him to look forward without some trepidation to the kind of life which lay before Harry Lear. Yet what help was there for it? Children must needs grow into men, and if a man means to go to the bad, to the bad he will go, whether it be in barracks or in a country hamlet. This perhaps, was also the opinion of old Lear, who had very little to say upon the subject. He looked sad, and doubtless felt so; but, being no fool, he submitted to the inevitable, as we all must, and did not care to relieve his feelings by making a fuss about it.

Thus it came to pass that, one fine morning, Harry Lear trudged down the village street with a bundle over his shoulder, and whom should he meet on his way (possibly this encounter was neither unforeseen nor undesigned by him) but the village schoolmistress, tripping along towards her daily avocations at her customary hour? A very pretty and trim

little brunette this village schoolmistress was, dressed a trifle above her station, as some people might have thought, though in truth her costume was quiet and modest enough, so far as material went. If it fitted her remarkably well and was cut in accordance with the latest fashion, that was, no doubt, due to the circumstance that she had resided for six months under the roof of her aunt, who was a dressmaker in a good way of business at Plymouth, and that she should have profited by the family talent was only creditable to her.

But it was scarcely so creditable to her that on catching sight of an old friend, she first stuck her chin in the air, pretending not to see him, and then skipped nimbly on one side and tried to hurry past, as though she had been in fear of being insulted by him.

Harry took a long stride and placed himself in front of her, so as to bar her passage; yet, notwithstanding this somewhat aggressive movement, nothing could have been more humble or more piteous than the voice in which he said, "Won't you wish me good-bye, Bella?"

"Are you going away, then, Mr. Lear?" inquired Miss Bella with an air of surprise.

"Yes, Bella, I am going to Plymouth to enlist; and you know why. You might wish me Godspeed; 'twould be something for me to remember."

"Going to enlist as a common soldier!" exclaimed Bella, to whom we may be sure that this was no news, and who chose to ignore the latter half of Harry's sentence. "Well, that does seem a pity! Though I daresay you know best; and certainly discipline is good for some people. A private soldier would get into trouble if he took it into his head to bawl and swear in church, I suppose."

"I've asked the Rector's pardon," returned Harry rather shortly. "Maybe I had my reasons for what I did; but that's neither here nor there. Motcombe has got rid of me now, and so have you. It wouldn't cost you a great deal to give me a kind word before we part, Bella."

"I'm sure I wish you every success and—and amusement in your new calling, Mr. Lear. Perhaps you won't mind my saying that I should prefer your addressing me as Miss Harvey. It's more usual."

"After having called you Bella all my life?"

"I am not a child any longer, Mr. Lear, nor are you, though I must say that you sometimes behave

very like one. But I shall be late for school if I stand here talking. Good-bye, Mr. Lear."

"Good-bye—Miss Harvey," returned Harry sadly; and so they parted without so much as shaking hands.

But before she had taken half-a-dozen steps Bella was apparently struck by an afterthought, for she stopped short, faced about and returned towards her disconsolate lover with a smile upon her lips. She had stuck a posy of forget-me-nots in the front of her dress, one of which flowers she now detached and held out to him. "I have heard that soldiers sometimes need to be reminded of those whom they have left behind them," she remarked demurely.

Then she turned once more and was out of sight before Harry had half recovered from the amazement into which he had been thrown by so unexpected a gift. It will be perceived that this innocent and rustic maiden knew how to flirt as well as any lady in Belgravia or Mayfair. The art of flirtation is, indeed, a very simple art, and one of which the rudiments may be readily acquired.

The regiment in which Harry Lear enlisted had, like nine-tenths of the corps which compose the British army, recently received a designation under

which its best friends might have failed to recognise it. It was now known as the Princess Charlotte of Wales's Royal Berkshire, and he had probably selected it in preference to any other regiment then quartered at Plymouth because it was under orders to leave that place immediately for Aldershot. During the next few months he did not write very frequently to his parents, but his letters, when they came, were always of a satisfactory nature. Perhaps, as Bella Harvey had observed, discipline is good for some people; perhaps the education which Harry had received stood him in good stead, or perhaps he had a natural aptitude for soldiering. However that may be, his promotion was unusually rapid, and the Rector, hearing at intervals of his advancement to the successive grades of lance-corporal, corporal and sergeant, was rejoiced and comforted. Autumn, winter and spring had passed away and summer had come round again when the news reached Motcombe Regis that old Mr. Lear's son had attained to the latter honourable rank; and if the whole truth must be told, old Mr. Lear—ordinarily a most temperate man—drank rather more cider than was good for him upon the strength of it, thereby earning for

himself the conjugal rating which he doubtless deserved.

As for honest Mr. Staddon, he rubbed his hands and said to himself, with pardonable complacency, "I think if I were to preach my last year's sermon over again in Harry's hearing he wouldn't call me a liar now." In truth he quite hoped that that unlucky attachment of Harry's was by this time a thing of the past and that its consequences would prove by no means so disastrous as they had once appeared likely to be.

Whether Miss Bella Harvey altogether concurred in that hope is another question. A sergeant is not exactly the same thing as a private soldier; but, setting that consideration aside, it is probable that she like the rest of her sex was not particularly anxious that any rejected suitor of hers should get over his disappointment too soon. However, her thoughts were just now a good deal occupied with a rival of Harry's, who might be considered a very formidable rival as regarded social position, though scarcely so in respect of personal appearance.

The Reverend Ernest Whitestole, Mr. Staddon's curate, had straw-coloured hair, protuberant eyes of

an indeterminate hue and a chin which ran away from his nose. Physical beauty, therefore, was not his strong point; but he had other points about him which were very strong indeed: his gentility, for instance, which was beyond dispute; also his irreproachable character; also his deep and reverent admiration for Miss Bella. And he lodged in the house of Miss Bella's aunt, with whom that orphan had found a home; so that occasional opportunities of entering into conversation with the object of his affections were afforded to him elsewhere than at the schoolhouse. He did not, it is true, avail himself of these opportunities to the full extent that he might have done, his remarks, when they did not bear upon strictly parochial affairs, referring for the most part to atmospheric conditions; still, if a man's meaning be but clear, it is a matter of secondary importance that he should express it clearly, or indeed that he should express it at all. Now Mr. Whitestole's meaning was perfectly clear both to Bella and to her aunt.

Miss Harvey the elder, though a less successful woman than her sister the Plymouth dressmaker, was nevertheless one who enjoyed a high measure of local esteem, having for many years satisfactorily

met the small local demand for linen-drapery, besides having faithfully served the State in the capacity of postmistress of Motcombe Regis. She was, therefore, not disinclined towards ambitious matrimonial views on behalf of her niece, and it is very likely that she would have felt quite justified in encouraging the amorous Whitestole but for the quasi-maternal obligations which her position with regard to that young man seemed to impose upon her. For the privilege of lodging the curate was hers by prescriptive right. She had always lodged Mr. Staddon's curates and had always considered herself as in a measure responsible for their conduct, as well as for the darning of their socks. Thus, when she saw how things were going, it became a question of conscience with her whether she ought not to "speak to the Rector," and she was only dissuaded from taking that officious course by the representations of Bella, who pointed out to her that to do this would be to assume what as yet Mr. Whitestole had given nobody the right to assume.

"Of course you can do whatever you think proper, Aunt Susan," said she submissively; "but you will make me look very foolish if it turns out that

you have made a mistake, and—I am afraid you will lose your lodger."

Acknowledging the cogency of these arguments, Miss Harvey consented to hold her peace, and, for the time being, took up an attitude of observant neutrality.

All doubt as to the curate's intentions was, however, put an end to, so far as Bella was concerned, one Sunday evening, when he overtook her while she was walking slowly homewards across the fields from church. Her apparent astonishment and her asseverations that she had never dreamt of such a thing as his asking her to be his wife may not have been wholly sincere; but, after all, it is permitted to women to be a little bit insincere under such circumstances, and great allowance should doubtless be made for those who are not quite certain about their own wishes. Bella allowed it to be understood that this was her predicament. "What would your family think of it. Mr. Whitestole?" she asked.

Mr. Whitestole, being a truthful man, was constrained to reply that, to the best of his belief, his family wouldn't like it at all. "But that," he added "is only because they have not seen you and do not know what you are. I feel sure that when I have

described you to my mother she will yield; and as for my father, I must tell him respectfully but firmly that my mind is made up. To incur his displeasure would naturally be painful to me, but to resign you, Bella, would be more painful still."

"But then—wouldn't he perhaps cut you off with a shilling?" the practical Bella suggested diffidently.

Mr. Whitestole admitted that that was possible, but did not seem to have reflected that the support of a wife and family upon his present stipend was altogether impossible.

It may be conjectured that this reflection was made for him. At any rate he got no promise—not even a conditional one—from the fair schoolmistress, who only declared that nothing would induce her to marry him without his father's consent. That, she was sure, would be wrong; she was not sure about anything else, except that the subject must be dropped for the present and that not a word must be said about it to anybody in Motcombe Regis. With these terms Mr. Whitestole was fain to content himself. Later in the summer he would be going home for a three weeks' holiday, and then he would speak to his people; until that time he would endeavour, he said, to possess his soul in patience.

Possibly Mr. Whitestole was a foolish fellow. One cannot speak positively upon the point because, different people have different ideas as to what constitutes folly; but, at all events, he was a loyal and honest man. From that day forth he spoke no more to Bella Harvey of love, but she perfectly understood that this was not because his love for her had diminished, and it may be hoped that she appreciated his delicacy. She bade him farewell with a charming mixture of shyness and regret when he departed on his well-earned leave of absence in the month of August, timidly expressing a hope that he would enjoy himself. To this he replied that an occasional holiday was good for everybody, but that he did not think he should be very sorry to return to his work.

That an occasional holiday is good for everybody is a sentiment with which Sergeant Lear would have fully agreed; and that Sergeant Lear and the Reverend Mr. Whitestole should have been granted a respite from the performance of their respective duties at one and the same time was a coincidence which Miss Bella Harvey might well consider providential. Motcombe Regis did not think highly of "sodgers" in the abstract, and Harry Lear's

determination to enlist had been generally looked upon as a sad example of voluntary self-abasement; but when this dazzling young non-commissioned officer returned home on furlough to visit his parents Motcombe Regis felt proud of him, and told him so. Even his mother had to confess that he was "smartened up wonderful." She regretted, indeed, his beautiful curly hair, which was now cropped so close to his head that it scarcely curled at all; but there was no denying that his carefully trimmed moustache and smooth-shaven cheeks gave him an air of vast superiority over the rustics amongst whom he had been brought up, nor could she help admiring his erect figure and his firm springy gait.

And it is hardly necessary to add that, if she admired him, the younger women of the village admired him still more. The story of his blighted affection was no secret to them, and more than one of those comely damsels would have been easily persuaded to undertake the task of consoling him. However, he had no eyes for them, nor many words either. His manner had acquired a certain peremptory abruptness which in no wise accorded with the leisurely West-country method of carrying on conversation and which was not of a nature to encourage

advances. Even the Rector was a little over-awed by him, respectful though he was and anxious to express his sincere regret for the breach of decorum which had led to his abandonment of Motcombe Regis and market-gardening.

"I hardly know you, Harry," the worthy man said; "I shouldn't have thought that any amount of drilling could have so changed a lad. But I suppose you must have been born to be a soldier."

"I suppose so, sir," answered Harry briefly.

But all this military shortness and abruptness disappeared entirely when the sergeant was permitted to hold parley with his old flame, Miss Bella Harvey. It was a long time before he obtained that permission, because it was her pleasure to keep him at a distance, to be occupied (although it was holiday time) whenever he came to her aunt's house, and to be provided with a companion of her own sex as often as he met her in the village. Within a day or two of the expiration of his furlough, however, he had the good fortune to encounter her upon the moor, a full two miles from home—or, to speak more correctly, he had the good fortune to be allowed to join her; for, as a matter of fact, he had traced her the whole way from her house, and whether she had

been aware that he was following her or not, who can tell? In any case she did not refuse to converse with him, and his conversation at the outset was of a humble, deferential and extremely uninteresting description. It was not until he had been sitting beside her on the sun-warmed heather, and enunciating solemn commonplaces for a full quarter of an hour, that he suddenly took his courage in both hands and said:

"Bella—I beg your pardon, Miss Harvey—I want to tell you before I go away that there's been no change in me this last year. I love you just the same as I always have, and I always shall. Look here!" —he drew a sheet of paper from his breastpocket, which, on being unfolded, disclosed a brown and dried flower which had once been a forget-me-not— "I've kept this with me and looked at it morning and evening ever since I joined; and if I've got on well and got on quickly, that's what I have to thank for it. I've kissed it I don't know how many thousand times, because 'twas your hand that gave it me, Bella—Miss Harvey, I mean."

"That was very silly of you, Harry—Sergeant Lear, I mean," observed Bella, casting down her eyes and smiling.

"Was it? Well, I don't know; I doubt I should never have been a non-commissioned officer without it. And sometimes—but perhaps you'd think that silly too—I said to myself that non-commissioned officers have got their commissions before now, and will again. I know well enough that a sergeant, even a colour-sergeant, is beneath you; but a sub-lieutenant is a gentleman, whatever his birth may have been."

"Indeed! And what do you have to do before you can rise to be a sub-lieutenant?"

"Ah, there 'tis! The only chance is active service; but t'other battalion is in Egypt, and I might be sent out to join 'em any day, and then, perhaps, if I was lucky—but maybe it'd make no difference with you if I was."

Bella was not quite prepared to say that. From time immemorial ladies have been pleased by doughty deeds, and the brave have deserved the fair. During the prolonged colloquy which ensued she gave him no excuse for assuming that victory was within his grasp; but, on the other hand, she was good enough to say that she considered his past misconduct atoned for by his recent steadiness, and in the course of their homeward walk she led him on to

expatiate upon the glorious possibilities which await every fighting man. The conclusion which he drew from her extremely guarded utterances, after he had said good-night to her, was that if only he could manage to distinguish himself in the field, there would at least be hope for him, but that in justice to herself she could never consent to follow the drum as a mere sergeant's wife.

Of these hopes he said nothing to his mother, though she questioned him as closely as she dared; but with his father he was a little more communicative.

"Wants to be a lady, do she?" was the comment of that man of few words. "Might be shorter cuts to that than through wars and glory."

"I don't know of any," said Harry.

"Not for you to get to be a gentleman, my boy, but for she—well, there's curates. One of 'em lodgin' at her aunt's at this present time."

"I'm not much afraid of *him*," Harry declared after a short pause.

"Ah!" said old Mr. Lear, and returned to the horticultural operations which this dialogue had interrupted.

Afraid or not afraid, Harry had to go back to his

regiment, and this time he took no forget-me-not with him as a parting gift. Possibly Miss Harvey thought that such an aid to memory was no longer requisite.

If he had looked out of the railway-carriage window at Exeter he might have recognised amongst the passengers in the down train, which he met there, the pensive countenance of his rival. Mr. Whitestole, who habitually looked pensive, had better reasons than usual for looking so now. It is enough to make any dutiful son look pensive when his mother tells him that she is determined to oppose the dearest wish of his heart tooth and nail, and this was the unwelcome piece of news which the poor man had to convey to Motcombe Regis. Being too honest to conceal the truth, he made it known to Bella immediately after his arrival.

"It has been a terrible disappointment to me," he confessed. "Of my father's approval I did not feel very sanguine, but I did think that my mother would have taken my part. However, I have failed to—to enlist her sympathies. Why I hardly know, for my dear mother is anything but a worldly woman."

"It is very natural that she should object to your

marrying beneath you, Mr. Whitestole," said Bella quietly. "Of course you must think no more about it."

But the curate was a resolute man as well as a dutiful son. He declared emphatically that his love was unalterable, and that as long as Bella did not love anyone else, he should cling to the hope of some day calling her his own. Only he admitted that, since he had at present no home to offer her, he could not ask her to consent to a formal engagement.

The privilege of considering himself informally engaged was not denied to him, nor was he informed that there was a young sergeant of infantry who had the audacity to cherish aspirations resembling his own. Nothing is so cruel as to deprive a fellow-creature of the consolation of hope, and Bella's was not a cruel nature. Besides, she really would not have felt justified in saying that neither of her suitors had grounds for hope. Mr. Whitestole was a very good man, who might some day be a Bishop; on the other hand, Harry Lear was a handsome, soldierly young fellow, who might some day (though that was not quite so likely) be the colonel of a regiment. Therefore it seemed to her best to say very

little, to perform her daily duties with modesty and diligence and to trust in an overruling Providence for the ultimate solution of all doubts and difficulties.

But that attitude, unexceptionable though it may be, is generally found an impossible one to maintain for any length of time. Bella Harvey maintained it for nearly six months, which, as everyone must allow, was a creditable performance. During those six months letters of an impassioned character reached her from Aldershot, and to these she never failed to send a discreet word or two of reply, because one should always acknowledge correspondence. But it came to pass that Mr. Whitestole got wind of the said correspondence, and asked questions concerning it which made it necessary to explain to him that he was not the sole aspirant for the schoolmistress's hand. In her candid, innocent way, Bella told him that she admired brave men and brave actions, that she had a sincere affection for the playmate of her childhood and that she was touched by his constancy, although she had been unable to promise him what he had asked for.

"I can't bear to—to disappoint those who care for me, Mr. Whitestole," said she with a slight tremor

in her voice. "But perhaps I am wrong; perhaps a girl ought always to say either 'yes' or 'no' and have done with it."

Perhaps so; but as Mr. Whitestole did not want Bella to say "no" to him and have done with him, he was open to admit that hesitation might, under certain circumstances, be permissible. The effect of her remarks, however, was to convince him that hesitation on his own part must last no longer; and so, shortly after Christmas, he obtained leave from the Rector to go home for the inside of a week, in order, as he explained, that he might discuss certain urgent private affairs with his family.

What those urgent affairs might be the guileless Mr. Staddon had no idea until after his curate's return, when he was enlightened by a half-piteous, half-indignant epistle from Mrs. Whitestole, who wrote to tell him of the "dreadful entanglement" in which her dear Ernest had become involved, and who seemed to think that it was his business to disentangle her dear Ernest forthwith. The Rector did what he could. Personally he was inclined to agree with Mrs. Whitestole, holding that it is undesirable, in the abstract, that a gentleman should marry a village schoolmistress; but the application

of abstract principles to particular instances is always apt to be troublesome, and he did not get the best of it in the friendly discussion to which he invited his curate. The latter pointed out, reasonably enough, that if he had not yielded to his mother's entreaties and his father's threats, he was scarcely likely to do so in deference to arguments which he must venture to call irrelevant. Was Miss Harvey vulgar? Was she uneducated? Was she in any respect unfitted to associate with ladies? Very well, then; the question simply resolved itself into one of her present position. And from that position he proposed to remove her.

"Yes, yes," answered the Rector; "that is all very fine. But how are you going to do it, my dear fellow? How are you going to marry unless your father provides you with the means?"

Mr. Whitestole replied that he hoped in due season to obtain preferment which would render him independent of his father.

"Oh, well," returned the Rector, somewhat relieved, "if you are content to wait until that day comes——"

Rectors are very generally surprised when their curates obtain preferment, and mothers are always

surprised if their sons do not, so that Mrs. Whitestole found Mr. Staddon's reply to her letter much less reassuring than the writer had intended it to be. She therefore appealed through the post to the better feelings of "the young person" herself, and the young person returned an evasive answer; and then Archdeacon Whitestole wrote in terms which were scarcely clerical or becoming to his reverend brother at Motcombe Regis. Thus matters were working up towards an uncomfortable crisis in that hamlet, when news came to old Mr. Lear that his son had been ordered off to Suakim with drafts to join the other battalion of his regiment, which had already been dispatched thither.

It is an ill wind that blows nobody any good. The expedition which was sent to Suakim in the early part of the year 1885 to chastise Osman Digma can hardly be said to have conferred glory or profit upon the nation (which, nevertheless, was understood at the time to demand it); but it gave his opportunity to Sergeant Lear. He wrote in high spirits to his sweetheart, from whom, just before he sailed, he received a missive which gladdened his heart. "I know you will do your duty, dear Harry," Miss Bella wrote with unaccustomed warmth; "and you may

be sure that we shall be thinking of you and praying for you at home while you are fighting your country's battles."

Of course he could not begin fighting his country's battles for some weeks; and that, no doubt, was why she did not think a great deal about him during the interval. She had, instead, to think about Mr. Whitestole, whose suit was no longer a secret to her friends and neighbours, and to whom she was commonly understood to be engaged, notwithstanding her assurances that such was not the case. The Rector's thoughts and attention were also much taken up in the same quarter. After all, a man is more or less answerable for his curate, and Mr. Staddon, having been a good deal ruffled by the Archdeacon's letter, was beginning to take his curate's part. There is something, surely, to be said on behalf of an honest and steadfast attachment; and the end of it was that Mr. Staddon undertook a flying visit to the other side of England for the purpose of saying this. He met with no success, nor did he get any thanks for his pains; all that he gained by his journey being an intimation that he would do well to look out for a new curate, since it was Archdeacon Whitestole's intention to remove his son at

once from the perilous neighbourhood of Motcombe.

Mr. Staddon returned home by the night mail. Not being overburdened with pocket-money, he did not see his way to increasing the cost of a fruitless expedition by the amount of a London hotel bill, so that he reached Plymouth early in the morning and dozed in the waiting-room until such time as he could obtain a frugal breakfast. Thence he travelled by the branch line which brought him to a station within three miles of Motcombe Regis, and set out to perform the remainder of his journey on foot. It was a mild spring morning, the wind blowing gently from the westward; the hedges in sheltered places were already sprinkled with green and the horse-chestnut buds were prepared to burst upon a little further encouragement. The Rector, who had started in a rather bad humour (for it is annoying to have spent the best part of ten pounds and to have received nothing but a nasty snub in return, not to speak of the worry of having to provide oneself with a new and unknown curate), grew more cheerful under the influence of fresh air and exercise and was quite inclined for a little neighbourly conversation when, on nearing home, he caught sight of old Mr. Lear's battered hat.

"Nice growing weather, Mr. Lear," he called out.

The old man was not working, as usual; he was leaning over his gate and held a newspaper in his hand. "You seen the *Western Mornin' News*, sir?" he asked in a rather hoarse voice.

"No, indeed, I haven't," answered the Rector; "I quite forgot to buy it. Has anything particular happened since yesterday?"

Old Lear raised his faded blue eyes, his lips moved, but no articulate sound issued from them. Then all of a sudden he broke out in a loud voice: "My boy, he've been killed fightin' the lousy Arabs."

The Rector's heart gave a great bound, and a hand seemed to be clutching at his throat. "Oh, my poor Harry!" he ejaculated.

Poor Harry!—poor, rosy-cheeked, curly-headed Harry, who used to be the best treble in the village choir until his voice broke, and who had won many a cricket-match for Motcombe Regis by his swift bowling. Such a good boy!—such a plucky boy! High-couraged and a little impatient of control at times, as the best specimens of men and beasts always are, but a boy whose heart was in the right place, and who had never said or done a shabby thing. Ah well! it is appointed to all men once to

die, dearly beloved brethren, and this mortal life is but the prelude to an infinitely higher and happier state of existence; and why should we mourn for those who are not lost, but gone before? Something of this kind the Rector had said scores of times from the pulpit, honestly meaning and believing every word of it, but he could not manage to say it now. The fluent commonplaces died away upon his lips in the presence of a dumb sorrow for which no earthly consolation could be found. When he went into the house, where Mrs. Lear, with her apron tossed over her head, was rocking herself to and fro and moaning, he himself was dumb. He thought he ought to speak to her of the will of God and the comfort of faith, but he could not bring himself to perform this cruel duty—if, indeed, it was his duty—and all that he could say was, "Oh dear! oh dear! what a sad misfortune!"

Mrs. Lear took no notice of him; and presently her husband led him out into the sunshine again, saying, with a sort of subdued pride, "I should like just to read that theer newspaper story to you, sir, if I might make so bold."

The Rector seated himself upon the window-sill, while Mr. Lear slowly and laboriously spelt out the

account of the engagement which has since become known as the battle of Tofrek—how Sir John M'Neill's force had been surprised by the enemy whilst constructing a zareba; how it had only been saved from annihilation by the gallantry and steadiness of the Berkshire Regiment; how the men of the Naval Brigade had fought like heroes; and how the attack had at last been repulsed, though not without terrible loss of life on both sides. All this Mr. Lear narrated without a break in his voice, but over the last paragraph he began to falter a little.

"'Arter the fightin' was nearly over, a desultory fire—was kep' up from the shelter of the mi—mimosa scrub, which proved sing'larly effective and might have largely swelled our list of cashalties, but for the desperate valour—desp'rate valour—Colour-sergeant Lear——'"

Here the old man stopped abruptly, thrust the paper into Mr. Staddon's hands, turned his back and walked away.

The rector read on, not without difficulty (for he had not his spectacles with him, and somehow or other he could not keep his eyes clear, though he kept rubbing them)—"But for the desperate valour of Colour-sergeant Lear, of the Berkshire Regiment,

who determined to dislodge the marksmen, and, leaping over the zareba, made for their place of concealment. This brave fellow accomplished his object, killing four of the enemy before he himself, pierced through and through by their spears, met a soldier's death."

A soldier's death! Well, there is no better way of dying, and if the fate of a sergeant is soon forgotten, that of a field-marshal is not remembered for a great many years. Perhaps it does not matter very much whether one is a field-marshal or a sergeant, remembered or forgotten. But what is to be said to two old people who have been deprived of their only child and whose remaining years of labour must necessarily be dull, lonely and objectless? The poor rector could think of nothing adequate to say, so presently he went away, blaming himself for his inefficiency. Had he known all, he might possibly have found some relief in blaming Bella Harvey; but he did not know all, and this solace was reserved for Mrs. Lear, who subsequently availed herself of it.

As for Bella, she wept bitterly when the news was brought to her. That poor Harry's life had been forfeited for her sake she had no doubt. He had risked it, she felt sure, in the hope of obtaining a

commission as his reward, and it was dreadfully sad to think that he was now beyond the reach of any reward that the Queen or a school-mistress could bestow upon him. Yet, as Mr. Staddon had most truly asserted in a sermon which will always be remembered in Motcombe Regis by reason of the prompt and emphatic contradiction which it elicited at the time, the objects upon which we set our affections are not always of a nature to promote our happiness, and it may be that if Harry Lear were living now and were married to the girl of his choice, he would be a soured and disenchanted man.

Happily no such calamity has befallen the Reverend Ernest Whitestole, who, shortly after he received the paternal command to resign his curacy, had the good luck to obtain a college living, and who at once took advantage of his independence to set the paternal wishes at defiance by leading his landlady's niece to the altar. He has been forgiven: when one's sons do things that can't be undone, there is practically nothing for it but to forgive them and make the best of it. Besides, his wife is really such a nice, modest, ladylike person, that no one would ever suspect her of having an aunt who is a Plymouth dressmaker and another who keeps a small village shop. She

does not obtrude these aunts upon the public notice; she does not invite them to stay with her, being persuaded that, on her husband's account, it would be wrong to do so. However, she employs one of them to make her frocks, which shows that she is alive to the claims of relationship, notwithstanding her translation into a higher social sphere.

Mr. Lear died not long ago. He never changed his habits, nor ceased to work hard, nor cared to speak much about his loss; but there is some reason for believing that he died of a broken heart, which is often a lingering disease. At his expense a small marble tablet has been erected in Motcombe Regis Church to the memory of Colour-sergeant Lear, whose prowess is set forth thereon in the words of the newspaper telegram, which the old man carried about with him in his breast-pocket to the day of his death. That hero, like many another hero, has remained unknown to fame. Of "desperate valour" there is not likely to be any lack so long as England remains a nation; nor, let us hope, will English soldiers ever forget themselves so far as to doubt whether their valour and their lives are well expended in procuring a parliamentary majority for Mr. This or Mr. That.